

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: TEACHER AND GUIDANCE COUNSELOR PERCEPTIONS  
OF CLASSROOM DIVERSITY: ARE INSTITUTIONAL  
BARRIERS DISCOURAGING CLASSROOM DIVERSITY  
IN ADVANCED COURSES?

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Since the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas decision in 1954, and the implementation of city-wide and nation-wide initiatives toward re-integration of schools that followed in subsequent decades, school populations across the country have diversified considerably. However, segregation continues to exist *within* schools. For example, minority students in accelerated (Advanced Placement or Honors) classes continue to be underrepresented. Theorists and educators alike often employ cultural models of minority underachievement in education to explain the near absence of students of color in many of our nation's accelerated public high school classes. Yet institutional barriers may be critical components of the exclusion of minority students from these classes.

This study examined the case of a large public High School in Virginia – where white students make up 25% of the total school population, but 58% of advanced courses, black students make up 43% of the total school population, but only 24% of advanced courses, and Hispanic students make up 25% of the school student body, but only 9% of advanced courses. The study found institutional barriers in the form of inconsistently implemented policy, and subjective decision making by school faculty in policy enforcement, as possible explanations for the persistence of the lack of diversity in advanced courses.

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by

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## **Race & Schooling in Capitalist America**

The demographic landscape of the United States has changed remarkably in the last century as a result of immigration, intermarriage, and birth/death rates. These transitions have forced people to rethink and redefine concepts of race and ethnicity. Moreover, great debates have taken place regarding the arbitrariness and/or relevance of race as a category of separation. The “social construction” of race shows that the concept of race has been developed through institutions and cultural patterns of the dominant society as a way to exclude certain people. The practices, behaviors, and policies of social institutions reveal that race does really matter because exclusivity in social institutions is tolerated and persists, to the further denigration of minorities. However, many school administrators treat students of all different races and ethnicities as one in the same – in a sense pretending that race does not exist. In this attempt at establishing schools as the “great equalizers”, the pathology of segregation within schools, often undiagnosed and festering, continues. It is aggravated by a yet further stratified work place and wider society (Bowles and Gintis, 1981).

Rarely are the very specific inequalities of educational institutions addressed in schools, as schools are viewed as environments where merit and individual performance are rewarded. Attention is given to the individual agency and the performance of individual students, and less so to the frame or space or institution which houses student development, is responsible for human investment, and greatly influences and

determines educational outcomes – both perceived and actual (Payne,1984; Schultz, 1961).

The main findings in this thesis are about institutional barriers. Though notions about human, social, and cultural capital appear throughout this study, they supplement broader findings about barriers embedded in institutional practices. Schooling institutions place high value on an individual's social capital. By social capital I mean the students' and parents' networks, including other parents, teachers, and community members that add value to all who are connected in the social network. Access to individuals who pose as advocates for student development and success both educationally and professionally can facilitate achievement beyond what one individual alone may be capable (Coleman, 1966). For many students, having advocates within schools reaps tangible outcomes that if left to chance may not have been realized. Problematic is that social capital is not equally distributed amongst all classes and races of students; consequently providing tangible rewards in the form of access to accelerated courses for some students, and not others.

Schools' varying investments in students often stem from a student's transferable social capital and perceived future ability to contribute and compete in the capitalist system. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis in *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) discuss at great length the role of schooling in legitimating the way society thinks about capitalism. They claim that there is a recreation of the social relations of the workplace in schools. Central to Bowles and Gintis' ideas are that capitalism determines how much



human capital and skill investment is made, and for whom within an unequal school structure. Bowles and Gintis' main focus is on the uneven development of human capital in schools across socioeconomic status (class) and race and ethnicity, that ultimately "perpetuat[e] [a] structure of privilege" (Bowles and Gintis, 1981). The attainment of cognitive, physical, and operational skills, "represents a central function of the educational system" (Bowles and Gintis, 1981). The rampant inequality in schools manifests itself in the low human capital and skill development investment for some students (mainly poor and minority) and high human capital and skill investments for other students (white and middle to upper class).

Bowles and Gintis assert that schools are quite similar to, and socialize students into the capitalist process. This is done through a hierarchical division of authority, rewards such as grades, competition between students, and the student's lack of agency due to an extremely structured type of instruction. A close look at schools shows how this process prepares students to be divided into ruling and working classes. Typically, students with more social and cultural capital will attend better schools, and do better in school than children with limited cultural and social capital that is not valued by mainstream society. Schools that are better financed, usually in wealthier areas, tend to promote a more permissive environment. This environment allows children more choice in areas of curriculum and reduces the hierarchical division of authority (although it is not entirely eliminated). This is accomplished by funding that allows for a plethora of electives and extracurricular activities, better in-school resources, and

smaller class sizes. This type of environment allows a student to grow and be more freethinking and prepares them to take their place as future leaders and innovators of the workplace, and ultimately, society. Schools in areas with less funding do not have these options available and are socializing their children into becoming used to routine, very structured and boring jobs, with strict authoritarian control and a reward system similar to that present in schools.

Black and Hispanic students do have individual agency. Students themselves possess the power and the ability to influence their own lives. However, Coleman's (1966) arguments bring to question the effectiveness of student agency without social capital – that is connections to those who have the power to guide them through the educational system in ways most appropriate for them. The reality for many lower class and minority students is that they do not have the dominant and mainstream culture's capital that could facilitate relationships that assist in guidance through schooling institutions. Bourdieu categorized cultural capital into three states: personified in the individual, tangible in the form of cultural goods, or embedded in institutional norms such as academic credentials. Bourdieu considered schools legitimizers of the cultural capital of the mainstream masses (1986). No matter how effective student's efforts at securing a positive future for themselves, students without mainstream cultural, and social capital that are valued and replicated in school will undeniably face more obstacles and challenges because of a lack of support from school faculty (who are largely of the mainstream, middle class), and have powerful authority within schools.

As a result of students' debunked efforts, some may adopt alternatives such as underachieving, not maximizing their full potential in school, or dropping out. These alternatives do not lead to advanced course exposure in secondary schools, nor to the benefits of college admission that ensue from advanced courses.

When there is a school as diverse as Wilson High School, the high school of focus in this case study, the children of the wealthy attend school with the children of the working, and non-working poor. There are students who drive their luxury cars to upscale bistros for lunch, and those who qualify for government-subsidized free and reduced lunch. Unlike the schools of focus in Orfield et. al's (2004) assessment of segregated schools due to zoning and neighborhood segregation, all of these children are housed in one building, attending one school. Yet, according to Bowles and Gintis, students of higher-class parents typically attend better schools, with better funding, and smaller class sizes, with access to better classes and extracurricular activities, and more interesting instruction. On the contrary, children of lower class parents should be used to more menial instruction and the type of basic instruction that prepares them for their inherited place in the hierarchy of society at the bottom or lower end of the socioeconomic ladder.

In schools such as Wilson High School, with this type of diversity, where typically, students as a result of zoning and access to other schools wouldn't usually be housed together, they are actually brought together in one building. Yet, there is the same effect that there would be if there were in fact two high schools at opposite ends of

the city, with very different tax bases. The Wilson High School students in higher socioeconomic strata with mainstream social capital, end up in top tier Advanced Placement and Honors advanced courses, while Wilson High School students in lower socioeconomic strata are predominantly in general track classes. In the case of many of the nation's high schools, and in particular Wilson High School, those students appearing in the top tier classes are predominantly white, and those in the general track classes are black and Hispanic.

In the years prior to Brown vs. Board of Education (1954), it was normal to separate races of students. Once that legislation dismantled the previously sanctioned separation of students, integration often found students separated not as much by race as by class. Still in 2004, institutions such as schools find themselves attempting to rectify past policies that were meant to deliberately separate races and classes of individuals. There have been a host of sweeping laws, bills, and policies that in one form or another have been charged with solving inequities like housing segregation, job discrimination, and the achievement gap. These initiatives have been met with varying degrees of support and criticism. However, they end up as minimally to moderately successful, unsuccessful, or in the worst cases, abandoned due to lack of efficacy. America can be accused of trying to solve the problems and/or issues of race, without addressing that systems of racial inequality lie at the root of these problems. By attempting to gloss over issues of race and class, concepts that individuals still rank most controversial and sensitive of topics to address, Americans do a huge disservice to

those individuals for whom race and class are still ever so salient and marginalizing - people of color.

To address the inequities of formal tracking systems at the high school level, over half of United States secondary schools have adopted open enrollment policies (Ford, 1995). In general, these policies allow students to enroll themselves in any level class regardless of their previous school performance or recorded grade level. Exceptions of the policy are for classes that are taught sequentially and require prerequisites. The problem with open enrollment policies are that they are broad, sweeping solutions to very cultural - and race-specific phenomenon that addresses the placement of students in advanced classes. These policies are an attempt to empower students to “detrack” themselves. However, examination of the literature suggests that institutional barriers in the form of teacher and guidance counselor barriers, policy barriers, and structural barriers, often conflict with individual student effort.

### **Within School Walls: Cultural and Structural Features of Schools that Constrain Minority Achievement**

Institutional barriers are obstacles supported by a bureaucratic structure that inhibit and limit the power of individual agents to exercise the freedom of choice. In a three-year longitudinal study of 10 racially and socio-economically mixed urban and suburban secondary schools across the nation, Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna, (2001) attempt to explain the limitations of a choice-based policy of enrollment. These

researchers conclude that simply opening up advanced courses to students of color and low income students is not enough to boost their enrollment numbers in these courses because cultural and political issues are entrenched within issues of race and class. Student histories and experiences at the micro level are the product of a larger macro context.

The transition into advanced courses for students of color is not seamless, because hidden factors work against the elimination of course hierarchies, including institutional barriers, student aspirations, and student's desire for respect. In the 2001 Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna study, it was found that of the schools they researched, many of them only advertised their open access policy by word-of mouth – a system involving a network that tended to be utilized more by white students than black and Hispanic students. Black and Hispanic students recounted teachers' and guidance counselors' actions meant to discourage them from taking advanced classes. In some cases, teachers and guidance counselors refused to allow certain students to enroll, and in one instance, a guidance counselor's practice of "screening" students that she considered unfit involved administering an on-the-spot reading comprehension test whose results would determine the student's candidacy status for advanced course enrollment. As a result, these authors define teachers and guidance counselors as part of institutional barriers.

Additionally, researchers cite many other contributing factors to the dearth of African Americans in public school programs for the talented and gifted (Ford, 1994;

1995). Often school officials can not agree on the definition of giftedness, and thus are forced to rely on more subjective and biased decision making and labeling. This lack of consistency in giftedness labeling affords parents with more resources to devote towards private testing advantages and room for negotiating their child's admittance into these special programs. This research also points to educators' lack of understanding about cultural differences in learning styles and achievement aspirations. Ford (1995) claims that white teachers were more likely to label white children as gifted and that definitions of underachievement are particularly disparaging to African American students. Teachers are inadequately prepared to recognize giftedness among students from diverse cultural backgrounds and schools have generally garnered minimal resources towards making the gifted education population "look more like America" (Ford, 1994). How school officials handle the multiculturalism of their student populations has implications for student successes and failures in schools (Ford, 1994;1995).

Huerta (1999) discussed the barriers to the implementation of multicultural education training in a secondary teacher preparation program at Utah State Universities. Her study found that professors of secondary teachers in training were reluctant to implement diversity training and as a result many in-service teachers had no experience with diversity until the students were placed in their classrooms. This lack of exposure to students without mainstream capital resulted in teachers in many instances unable to relate to minority students, their parents, their learning styles and presenting cultures. Others, (Arredondo et al. 2001) charge that it is the responsibility of

individuals that serve in a more administrative capacity such as guidance counselor educators to increase the multicultural competence of the future guidance counselors that they are charged with training. Lee (2001) addresses the same theme of the need for culturally responsive school counselors and programs, so that the needs of all students can and will be met. Meeting the needs of all students, and not just those with transferable or mainstream capital, is an imperative component of the work of educators and counselors as facilitators of student development.

School officials (teachers and guidance counselors) are responsible for practicing standard operating procedures that manifest themselves in the ways in which these school officials deal with and relate to students. School faculty exercise power and to some degree autonomy and subjectivity in how they appropriate, interpret, and implement standard operating procedures. This power makes them vital supporting elements of the educational institution's internal structure. Where school faculty place or position themselves within the space of the institutional school structure determines if they can be considered barriers or facilitators of good practices.

This study gleans perceptions from school officials as to what they perceive barriers to be, and if they were present and discouraging classroom diversity in advanced courses at Wilson High School. The overarching question driving this study is: how are students ending up in the classes that they are, classes so racially segregated and polarized, at a school that has an Open Enrollment Policy? This investigation addresses if and how faculty at Wilson High School may be perpetuating a cycle of exclusion by



subjectively appropriating more human capital investment in some students over others through implementing or not implementing supposedly standard practices in advanced courses enrollment. Are there subjective manipulations of class rosters in advanced courses that inevitably create racial disparity in enrollment of students into advanced courses? If so, why is this happening?

## The Case Study

*"No indeed, the world is just as concrete, ornery, vile and sublimely wonderful as before, only now I better understand my relation to it and it to me. I've come a long way from those days when, full of illusion, I lived a public life and attempted to function under the assumption that the world was solid and all the relationships there in. Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health... Whence all this passion toward conformity anyway? - diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you'll have no tyrant states. Why, if they follow this conformity business they'll end up by forcing me, an invisible man, to become white, which is not a color but the lack of one. Must I strive towards colorlessness? But seriously, and without snobbery, think of what the world would lose if that should happen". Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, 1947*

One of the largest public high schools in Virginia, Wilson High School, as a result of a recommendation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, has formed a Collegiate Course Preparation Diversity Committee to research why there is enrollment disparity between students of color and white students in advanced courses, and to find solutions and best practices to be reviewed and implemented so as to ensure that this particular high school is an inclusive learning environment for all students. In waves one and two of the College Course Preparation Diversity Committee's research, they have conducted focus groups with the school's students and have collected their thoughts about the AP/Honors programs. These efforts have resulted in

recommendations for best practices moving forward. Such recommendations have included increasing the visibility of the county's AP Coordinator at the high school, or even expressing a need for a separate coordinator who would be solely focused on this high school, and not shared across schools district wide. The Committee has also suggested analyzing relevant testing data, paying for the AP exams, providing Summer skill workshops, tutoring, mentoring, and establishing support groups for students of color (Collegiate Course Preparation Diversity Committee Report, August 2003). Absent from these initial waves of research were teacher and guidance counselor perceptions of the current AP/Honors programs which are pivotal in providing administrators with supporting data to implement structural changes within the school - in particular policy changes. In meetings with the Collegiate Course Preparation Diversity Committee, many members (made up of school faculty) charged that "institutional barriers" are a leading cause of minority student's isolation from these advanced courses at this school. However, evidence of these "institutional barriers" has gone undocumented, and to date have been largely anecdotal.

Wilson High School is the only public high school located in its school district. The massive brick two-story structure is fitting for the approximately 2000 students enrolled there. The city is home to approximately 120,000. The city's population is about 22% black, 14% Hispanic or Latino, less than 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 59% white, and 5% Asian (Census 2000).

**Table 1: City Population Demographics**

Native American	1%
Asian	5%
Hispanic	14%
Black	22%
White	59%

*Source: Census, 2000*

The neighborhood and city that surrounds Wilson High School appears to be a conglomerate of ethnicities, cultures, dialects, and religions of native and foreign-born Americans that have chosen to make this city home. The children of wealthy parents attend school with the children of the working poor. Walking through the crowded halls of the high school are the children of doctors and those of janitors, the children of Central American immigrants, and native Virginians, black children, and white children - yet a closer examination of the school day gleans that the everyday learning experiences of these different children, attending the same school, are indeed different.

Walking through Wilson High School and focusing exclusively upon the Advanced Placement and Honors courses, one may conclude that she or he is in a school within a school. Offering approximately 17 Advanced Placement courses to its students, this school is notably respected as one of the more competitive public high schools in the nation. With a matriculation rate of approximately 84%, one could even argue that the 17 Advanced Placement courses offered at this school qualify it for junior college status, and a premier institution for preparing students for the challenges of college. With 78%

of the school's faculty holding post-graduate degrees, the high school is full of innovative teachers who are some of the best in their fields, and whose dedication to their craft and to their students, propel them to work much longer hours than the typical eight hour day. Teachers at this school have very different backgrounds and histories that become imperative for working at a school with as heterogeneous a student population as present there.

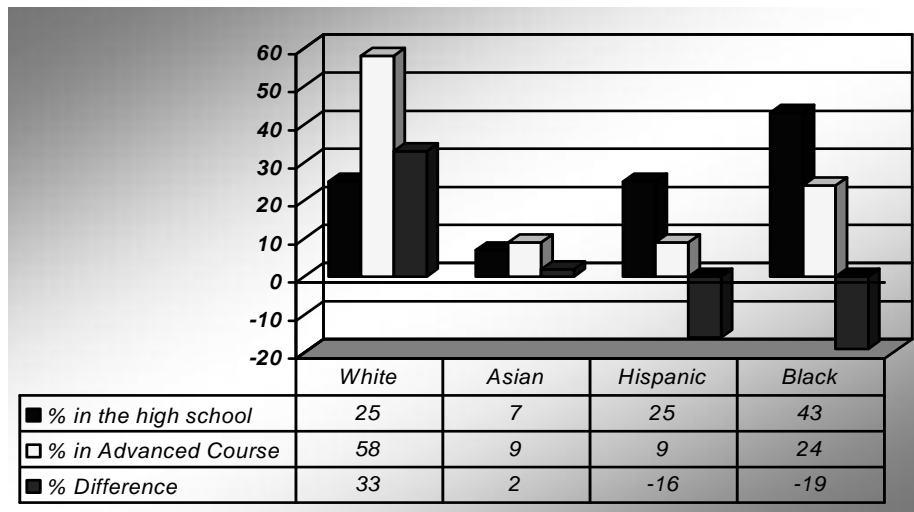
The student population is as diverse as the population of the city as a whole. Black students comprise 43% of the student population, Hispanic Students 25%, white students 25%, Asian / Pacific Islander students 7%, and Native American students less than 1%. Twenty-nine percent of students receive free or reduced price lunch, compared to the state average of 23% of ninth through twelfth grade students receiving subsidized meals. If one looked just at its recorded demographic statistics, Wilson High School could be the ideal model for diversity in public high schools and integrated school communities. However, as one walks through the school, one could conclude that the entire student population is Black and Hispanic. Where are the white and Asian students? In separate halls, in separate wings from regular classes, AP courses are conducted and within these classes is where you will find the majority of the white and Asian students.

**Table 2: Wilson High School Student Population  
Demographics 2002-2003**

Native American	1%
Asian /Pacific Islander	7%
Hispanic / Latino	25%
White	25%
Black	43%

The school's best and brightest students are enrolled in classes that are meant to challenge them, prepare them for college, and further excite them about the subject matter. Twenty-four percent of Black students are enrolled in AP and Honors classes although they comprise 43% of the school. Hispanic students make up 25% of the school, and only 9% of AP and Honors classes. White students make up 25% of the school yet make up 58% of AP and Honors classes. Asian students make up 7% of the school, and 9% of the students in AP and Honors classes. If all things were equal – access, for purposes of this study, being the preeminent indicator of equality one would project that student enrollment in advanced courses by race/ethnicity would parallel school enrollment by race/ethnicity. However, as observed by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and a handful of progressive teachers at this school, diversity is nearly absent in advanced courses at this high school (i.e. the classes are by most standards diverse, but do not parallel the diversity of the school population). The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools was insistent that Wilson High School further assess and evaluate this phenomenon.

**Table 3: Percent of Students Enrolled vs. in Advanced Courses by Race  
(2002 – 2003)**



For a school that prides itself on its open enrollment policies, and lack of institutional tracking at the high school level, Wilson High School looks very similar to the schools that have been critiqued because of their race and class based systems of differentiating student achievement. The school's course selection guide states that entry into Honors and AP courses is "open to any student willing to complete the required assignments." This open enrollment particularly applies to social studies and English courses that typically don't require prerequisites. Science, math, and foreign language classes have prerequisites, and some course descriptions recommend previous experience in Honors-level classes or a particular aptitude. As a result, English and

Social Studies classes tend to be more diverse than science and math classes. However, considering the “openness” of these English and social studies classes, and the relatively minimal exclusion criteria for enrollment, minority students are still severely underrepresented comparable to their population in the school, and with regards to advanced course enrollment, Wilson High School has yet to meet parity or equilibrium across racial groups.

By the time students arrive at Wilson High School, they have been put through a myriad of evaluations, assessments, and measurements that act as indicators for individual, building level, district level, and even teacher competency and performance. At the elementary school level, between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade, students can be identified for the Gifted and Talented (GAT) program. Students are either teacher recommended, parent recommended, or self recommended for this accelerated program. In addition to the recommendations being considered, there is an evaluation of the student’s grades, standardized test scores, and other criteria that are determined by the school district. Parents can appeal to the school, if necessary multiple times, regarding a decision that results in their child not being identified for the GAT program. The appeals of the most persistent, resourceful, and zealous parents often result in the student’s eventual placement in the GAT program, and the eventual placement of their siblings. Despite the fact that white students make up only 23% of the entire public school district’s students, white students make up 59% of all students in GAT. Black students make up only 24% of GAT students despite the fact that Black students represent 44% of the



school district. While Asian students are represented in GAT in numbers proportionate to their numbers in the district (6% and 8% respectively), Hispanic students account for only 9% of GAT students despite their accounting for 23% of the district.

**Table 4: School District's Student Enrollment (2003 -2004)**

Asian	6%
Hispanic	23%
Black	44%
White	23%

**Table 5: Gifted & Talented (GAT) Enrollment  
Elementary Through 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, 2003-2004**

Asian	8%
Hispanic	9%
Black	24%
White	59%

When students arrive at Wilson High School in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, the foundation has already been laid for the enrollment inconsistencies in advanced courses. As of Fall 2003, of 338 black 10<sup>th</sup> graders, 57 (17%) are in Honors courses. Of 232 Hispanic 10<sup>th</sup> graders, 20 (9%) were in Honors courses. Of 199 white 10<sup>th</sup> graders, 142 (71%) were in Honors courses, and of 54 Asian 10<sup>th</sup> graders, 16 (30%) are in Honors courses.

**Table 6: 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Enrollment  
Wilson High School Fall 2003**

Asian	7%
Hispanic	28%
Black	41%
White	24%

**Table 7: 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Enrollment in Honors Classes,  
Fall 2003**

Hispanic	9%
Black	17%
Asian	30%
White	71%

There is obvious disparity in the placement rates of white and Asian students as opposed to the placement rates of black and Hispanic students in 10<sup>th</sup> grade honors classes. These placements are largely predetermined prior to the arrival of these students at the high school facility by the district's 9<sup>th</sup> grade facility's guidance counselors. This placement is a likely ramification of previous GAT identification, and the effects of this early labeling likely manifest at the high school as students used to being labeled as talented and gifted seek out and know about the advanced courses at the high school level. These enrollment patterns reveal the exclusion of black and

Hispanic students. From among the ongoing discussions and debates about open enrollment policies and practices, this study examined student, teacher, and guidance counselor perceptions about diversity in advanced courses. Are institutional barriers affecting or influencing student enrollment in advanced courses?

### **Identification of the Problem**

Although there is no formal tracking system in place at Wilson High School, their advanced courses enrollment disparity leave them ripe for exploration as a possible microcosm for lingering inequalities of a formal tracking system that is GAT (Gifted and Talented) in the city's elementary schools. My interviews with school faculty examining the salience of race in the organization of school; specifically in combating practices and patterns that result in segregation among students, and the possible barriers that impede the process of implementing new and innovative policies that lead to more inclusive learning environments, prove insightful as to what is causing the continued lack of diversity.

A school such as Wilson High School has some unique challenges as it is the only high school in the entire school district, and all tax based funding and educational investments are poured into this one school. This school is to serve all of the communities' high school age students; of all classes and races. Yet, although the funding and resources are to be distributed among these students equally, the racial disparity in advanced courses suggests that this may not be the case. Unequal

investments in students are evident in the segregation of gifted and talented programs in primary and middle schools, and advanced courses enrollment in secondary schools. Low human capital investment in poor and minority students may be the result of the low social capital of these students. Yet, most problematic is that in an educational institution that should afford opportunities to all students regardless of monetary or economic capital and social capital, there is a failing to consistently and equally meet the needs of all students. What are the institutional barriers or constraints that are prohibiting diversity in advanced courses from being a natural occurrence in an otherwise diverse school without the problem of access to educational resources due to a lack of funding resources?

The system in place at Wilson High School appears to be working. That is, at least for some students, the white and Asian ones, who benefit from the 17 advanced courses offered at the high school. Those students underrepresented in advanced courses (black and Hispanic students), are classified as average or low performing and underachieving. The effect of the Open Enrollment Policy on black and Hispanic students until a couple of years ago, has not been viewed as pathologic or problematic, or even unusual because of the generalized low expectations for minority student school performance. This is how a disparity in advanced courses enrollment rates has persisted in Wilson High School, and the same may be true for hundreds of other high schools around the nation. Student enrollment in GAT and AP/Honors courses has been perceived as being based on merit. However, as the trend in enrollment disparities

become increasingly more noticeable, educators are forced to address where and how these policies are failing some students, and forced to question the “meritocracy” of course enrollment.

Students, teachers, and guidance counselors are all participants in a system that is charged with finding general solutions for populations of students that evidence shows need differentiating. Not all students arrive at school having had the same experiences, influences, and exposure to mainstream capital or learning processes. Adverse effects of general solutions to educational inequalities are most prevalent in black and Hispanic students, although students in general are not viewed as holders of power within schools. Students are truly those placed at risk by institutional barriers because it is their future that is dependent on the education that they receive in secondary schools. The increasing numbers of college applications received by colleges and universities annually has increased the competitiveness of college admissions. Colleges are moving towards admissions criteria that exclude applicants that have not taken and passed at least one Advanced Placement class. The evidence in section one of this report supports that at least at Wilson High School, white and Asian students are in a better position for the college admissions process than the black and Hispanic students who are not taking advanced courses in large numbers. Inequalities at the high school level have consequences that extend beyond the walls of this high school into the greater society.

### **Research Questions**

Meetings with the Collegiate Course Preparation Diversity Committee members, who also serve in teaching and guidance counselor capacities within the school revealed the following concerns: 1) lateral transfers, (students being transferred from one class to another of the same level) – which is against school policy, 2) students taken out of classes without a withdrawal form – the necessary documentation from the guidance department 3) low-achieving white students in advanced courses, and 4) teacher inconsistency in communicating Wilson High School Open Enrollment Policy, as well as encouraging qualified students of color to take advanced courses. In conducting interviews with school faculty, I drew on this background and sought to answer the questions of: 1) How do school faculty exercise power in standard operating procedure delineation; do they do so in a way that creates or sustains institutional barriers? 2) Are school faculty subtly or overtly participating in school segregation by not clearly critiquing practices that place only students with high social capital in advanced courses? 3) I also sought to uncover if school faculty mislabel subjectivity as objectivity in the processes that they ultimately control, which influences diversity in advanced courses. If so, then school faculty members subtly contribute to institutional barriers, and become institutional barriers themselves.

Many school officials knowingly and unknowingly exercise discretion, both personal and subjective, and applied knowledge (based on work experience), discretion. The problem lies less with discretion based on work related experience, because the range of possible discretions is contained within the occupation. However, individual's personal and subjective discretions that are based on a collection of experiences that make up their life histories can become problematic. The range of life experiences in any individual's life history is exponential compared to the range of experiences in any given occupation. It is within these ranges and experiences that biases are present. Biases affect and influence the discretions of decision-making school officials such as those at Wilson High School. When individuals have similar, or like life-histories, their decisions or discretions will be more consistent with each other. Through cognitive bias, the decisions individual's using discretion make, will favor individuals with whom they can relate, or who also have similar life histories and shared cultural capital. Mainstream discretion will ultimately benefit mainstream students.

Teacher and guidance counselor barriers may reveal themselves in educators' lack of understanding about cultural differences, the process of identifying gifted students, and the inadequate preparation of teachers to recognize giftedness among students from diverse cultural backgrounds as a result of a lack of diversity training (Arrendondo 2001; Ford 1995). The aforementioned may cause teachers and guidance counselors to subtly discourage minority students from enrolling in AP courses despite the Open Enrollment Policy and thus can be thought of as an institutional barrier themselves.

I expected that teachers and guidance counselors are not necessarily barriers to student enrollment in advanced courses. Instead, I proposed that guidance counselors and teachers, as well as students, are constrained by the entrenched frameworks of the schooling institution. What constrains all of the agents within schools are the overarching, sweeping “solutions”, such as the Open Enrollment Policy that ignore the saliency of race, culture, and class. Neglecting race, culture, and class in everyday school practices foster resistance of school officials to structural and policy changes because problems of students are attributed to a micro-level pathology of individual students. Instead, these problematic individual students are indicative of a macro level problem, but it is easier to address individual students, and to place the onus on them rather than whole groups, entire schools, and a host of policies and practices. When school officials ignore the relevance of race in school practices, it becomes easy to discount failing practices and policies to individual agent failings and shortcomings.



## Methods

In order to capture teacher and guidance counselor perceptions of advanced courses classroom diversity, I approached this investigation using qualitative methodologies. Perceptions are not easily quantified by scale measures and I believed that they could be best captured in in-depth interviews and discussions with members of the targeted sample. I recruited teacher and guidance counselor respondents for interviews via Wilson High School email listservs inviting all interested faculty members to contact me. In anticipation of a self-selection of respondents, I made efforts to not only interview those respondents that contacted me from my original email. I randomly directly contacted teachers and guidance counselors that I had not received response emails from to solicit participation in the study.

I interviewed three guidance counselors of five total guidance counselors at Wilson High School. I also interviewed nine teachers at Wilson High School of an eligible 20 teachers who met the inclusion criteria. Teachers targeted for interviews taught History and English 10<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students and had experience teaching regular track, Honors, and Advanced Placement courses. History and English teachers are those most familiar with the open enrollment practices at this high school. As mentioned previously in this report, math and science advanced courses are often taught sequentially and require prerequisites, largely excluding these courses from being included in those considered “open” in enrollment (though they technically are).

History and English classes, however, lack these prerequisites. Interviews were scheduled at the respondent's leisure and lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour

I obtained official permission from the school district where the study was conducted and the Institutional Review Board at UMCP. I prepared both Informed Consent Agreements for all respondents that were stamped with the official University of Maryland College Park stamp of approval from the Human Subjects Review Board (See Appendix A).

In an attempt to reduce the race of the interviewer effect on respondents producing what they perceive to be socially desirable answers, a white co-investigator and senior School Organizational studies major at UMCP, assisted with the interviewing of white respondents. I, the primary investigator am black. Both the co-investigator and I have training in qualitative methodology, and in particular interviewing techniques. We worked with more senior scholars, in particular members of the Master's thesis committee to hone and finalize interview questions. Please see Appendix B for a list of interview questions. In addition, in order to test the efficacy of the interview questions, we conducted mock interviews with three members of the Collegiate Course Preparation Diversity Committee all of whom will not be included in interviews pertaining to this study. No members of the Collegiate Course Preparation Diversity Committee participated in interviews that pertain to this study. However, all of the study participants appeared to have an understanding of the goals of the Collegiate Course Preparation Diversity Committee. Eight of 12 respondents had

positive reactions to the committee's work, with the remaining participants citing various reasons such as diversity not being a top-tier priority for the school, for their lack of support or non-involvement.

Once interviews were tape recorded, the co-investigator and I transcribed and coded the interview summaries. Although I tape recorded individual interview sessions, I did not make these tapes available to school officials. Interviews were conducted during the Fall and Winter of the 2003-2004 school year. For the purpose of privacy the name of the school has been changed.

## **Results**

This case study evidences that there are many influential factors that affect what courses students are enrolling in. Interviews have not revealed consistently implemented policies that would aid in the eradication of bias and manipulation in the enrollment of students in advanced, and even general track courses. In the absence of consistently practiced and seemingly standard and default ways of handling course enrollment- parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and even students themselves contribute to the building, enforcing, and maintenance of barriers that impede equality in advanced courses enrollment at Wilson High School.

All of the nine teachers interviewed agreed that diversity is important to learning and that diversity enhances the classroom environment. Teachers stated that having students from different backgrounds, races, and cultures in one class offered diverse perspectives in classroom discussion, and students were able to learn from these different perspectives. Teachers unanimously preferred diverse classroom environments as opposed to those where the race or socioeconomic class status was the same among all students. However, half of the teachers interviewed, and two of the three guidance counselors interviewed often cite instances where white middle-class parents were less enthusiastic about diverse classroom settings. Three of the nine teachers interviewed also observed that the advanced courses that they taught weren't very diverse.

Below I present six main findings from this study that provide further insight into the enrollment practices at Wilson High School. They are: 1) Faculty say awareness of the Open Enrollment Policy is not an issue; 2) Racial disparity in advanced course enrollment precedes high school; 3) The actions and influence of parents are the most overwhelming theme in determining what factors most effect student enrollment in advanced courses; 4) School faculty agree that objectively generated computer rosters are massaged to make them less diverse; 5) Massaged class rosters are kept in place to the benefit of privileged students and to the detriment of minority students and diversity; 6) Teachers and Guidance Counselors view the enrollment process somewhat differently – with teachers “blaming” Guidance Counselors for racial disparity and vice versa.

### **I. Faculty Say Awareness of Open Enrollment is Not an Issue**

School faculty articulated numerous failures at the district and building level to promote and enforce diversity within advanced courses. The majority of respondents (six out of nine teachers interviewed, and all three of the guidance counselors) felt that a lack of awareness about the Open Enrollment Policy was not the reason for a lack of diversity in advanced courses. Rather, they attribute the lack of diversity to a failure of decision makers and school leaders to communicate and enforce practices that would eradicate the biases and manipulations that tend to segregate courses. Respondents appeared to see the need for a more consistent way to ensure that students deserving of

the challenges of advanced courses were enrolled, and those who were not deserving of those challenges were not enrolled in advanced courses. Some teachers expressed frustrations at not being able to fight the battle they want to due to dealing with the everyday mass of challenges that they face in teaching in large public schools (overcrowding, shared classrooms, etc.).

*“I do think that students are aware of the Open Enrollment Policy. However, it goes deeper than saying, ‘ya’ll come’. If you look around, there aren’t many people of color teaching AP anything at this school. Like the [black] students, they told me that AP was for white kids. That was their perception of what AP was. And it really goes to the root of being comfortable. It’s like de facto segregation. People tend to want to be where they feel comfortable if the majority of your friends are in regular government class, you might have an interest in taking AP, but if you don’t feel comfortable in that environment you won’t enroll.” –Wilson High School Teacher*

## **II. Racial Disparity in Advanced Course Enrollment Precedes High School**

School faculty at Wilson High School have expressed perceptions of minority student reluctance to enroll in advanced courses, as well as a legacy for some students

that has propelled them to enroll in advanced courses – even undeservingly.

Respondents have cited a host of influences that contribute to the racial makeup of advanced courses. These include exposure to GAT and other types of advanced classes, exposure to advocates who push students into advanced courses, and exposure to advocates that make the connection for students about what types of courses they take in high school and how these courses affect their college admissions and other life goals. Many of these influencers precede the student's high school experience and are related to the student's social capital. Two of three Guidance Counselor respondents pointed to GAT and a lack of minority students in the elementary school level taking part in this program. Seven out of nine teacher respondents offered that GAT contributed to student future enrollment in advanced courses; if students weren't enrolled in GAT, then they wouldn't likely enroll in advanced courses.

*“There is an extreme trickle up affect from elementary school and the GAT program as far as who you see in Honors and AP courses in high school. Testing used to be very one-dimensional and parents with the resources and money could hire individuals to do private testing for their children. Now admittance is based more on a portfolio approach. Minority families almost never get their children tested for GAT – they don't even know that they have this option.” –Wilson High School Guidance Counselor*

*"I think that the whole label of 'gifted' is a mislabel that shouldn't be given to students. I've seen black kids who are bright mislabeled as remedial if they come from a lower class. And white kids mislabeled as gifted if they come from a higher class."* –**Wilson High School Guidance Counselor**

*"An awful lot of students take advanced courses as a result of exposure in GAT at the elementary school level. It becomes part of the self-defined track that they are on. Parental involvement plays a big part in this. When there is increased parental involvement, it raises the bar for student's expectations for themselves. In my general classes, I've observed that there is low parental involvement. General classes are taken less seriously. Parents of my Honors and AP students tend to communicate more with me via email, telephone; they come to back to school night and parent-teacher conferences."* –**Wilson High School Teacher**

*"A majority of my students in Honors English were in Honors English last year. I have very few students who are trying*



*Honors for the first time. For students that have taken Honors before, being in honors, or taking AP is like old hat to them. Students will mostly just take the types of classes that they are used to taking".* –**Wilson High School Teacher**

*"I've noticed that students typically go with the types of courses that they have always taken. In particular, students of color don't give taking advanced courses a lot of thought. They just take regular courses without even considering the advanced course option."* –**Wilson High School Teacher**

*"There are clearly kids taking AP and Honors courses that shouldn't do so. But because of the [white] color of their skin, and the track that they've been on since the 1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, they feel they belong in these advanced courses. They'd rather have a C or D average in AP or Honors course, as opposed to getting an 'A' or 'B' in a regular course, because they don't want to be with the minority population which you'll largely find in those regular courses."* – **Wilson High School Teacher**

*“For those [students] that had been in Honors [classes], taking another Honor or AP class is like second nature to them. They take these classes for college applications, resumes, and they need the extra .5 on their transcripts. I’ve noticed that for those students moving from General track to Honors, they are going to Honors classes more for the challenge than the .5; higher track students go more for the .5”. –Wilson High School Teacher*

*“Most of my weaker Honors students are white rather than students of color. It’s not a fair playing field. We are completely deluding ourselves if we think that everybody is going to come into elementary school with the same skills, background, and experience.” – Wilson High School Teacher*

### **III. The Actions and Influence of Parents are the Most Overwhelming Theme in Determining What Factors Most Effect Student Enrollment in Advanced Courses**

Parental involvement is linked to social and cultural resources that social class yields in American society. Educational status and material resources of parents increase with social class. In Lareau’s (1987) study, resources were observed to influence parental involvement and participation in schooling in both schools. Unfortunately, some forms of parental involvement are proving harmful as they are detracting from the

school's ability to successfully and equally serve all students, as school officials appear to be catering to the parents of a select few, with students on a select track, in an inner circle, attending a school within a school. These unequal interactions ultimately lead to inequities and inconsistencies in how the school executes policy; policies that are implemented so that all students have an equal chance to obtain the best education that this public school can offer them.

Teachers and Guidance counselors at Wilson High School cite different motivations and behavior of parents when interacting with school officials on their children's behalf. School faculty found black and Hispanic parents to be less involved in their children's education, and more trusting of school officials, while white parents were more involved and exercised their own judgment when dictating to the school where they wanted their children placed. All nine teachers also offered that parental influence on teachers and administrators were causes of a lack of classroom diversity in advanced courses and had either observed this in their own classes, or other teachers' classes.

*"Higher visibility of white students in advanced courses doesn't necessarily mean that they are higher achievers. Some kids are pushed into advanced courses by guidance counselors, themselves, or parents." – Wilson High School Teacher*

*“There is a difference in black students’ parents when compared to white parents. They [black parents] are less involved and trust the school more to take care of their child’s education.*

*White parents are more involved and think that they know best.”*

**–Wilson High School Teacher**

*“Parental involvement is mostly from white parents. Hispanic parents don’t come because of language – other minority parents don’t come because they are intimidated by the school. And more others don’t come because they think that it is the teacher’s job to take care of students.”* **–Wilson High Guidance**

**Counselor**

*“I have a couple of my students, black males who have advanced level intellect and brain power. However, one of them seems really angry. I don’t know, I think that his mother does not have a job or something. Anyway, they both are super smart kids, but I don’t think that they see how doing well in this class will afford them opportunities after graduation. I don’t think that they are thinking that far in advanced. White students who are on the advanced track aren’t always that future-savvy themselves, but a*

*lot of them have parents and people who do help them tell them what they need to do. This is an example of students being equally as smart if not smarter, but probably not going to end up in the same place.” –Wilson High School Teacher*

#### **IV. Faculty Agree that Objectively Generated Computer Rosters are Massaged to Make them Less Diverse**

In interviews with faculty at Wilson High School, both teachers and Guidance Counselors charged parents with taking specific action as a result of their perceptions, personal biases, and histories that have manipulated classroom diversity into a non-entity. Teachers expressed that the seemingly good intentions of concerned, involved parents, often turn into manipulative situations where school officials cave into the demands of these parents to appease them, so that they don’t withdraw their children from the school.

Teachers and guidance counselors stated that withdrawing white middle and upper class students could lead to the school’s detriment. The teachers expressed that having only the school’s minority and lower class students populating the school would render the school’s foundation less influential. It is believed that white middle and upper class parents hold a lot of power within the school district and are able to use their influence as the majority of the tax base, for the betterment of the school. Minority parents, and low-income parents are believed to not be holders of this power,

contributors of a lower tax base, and are therefore less influential. A higher tax base, leading to influence is viewed by teachers and guidance counselors as a motivating factor of school building and school district personnel to want to keep these parents satisfied with the school.

*"I've had white parents just come by to visit during the day, walk by my classroom, and see diversity [usually black students] and request that their children's class be changed because, 'my child doesn't belong in there. He doesn't look like any of the other students.'" –Wilson High School Teacher*

*"Quite frankly, that's why some parents want their kids in AP – because the classes are whiter, not necessarily for the challenge, or because they [parents] know that their children truly belong there." –Wilson High School Teacher*

*"Many parents desire to be social just like students do. This is a close-knit community setting. Parents want their kids with the kids of parents whom they know. When they come to parent night, they want to feel comfortable with the other parents. So sometimes a parent will call and want their kid moved for*

*whatever reason. It's very social. The principal is not supposed to, but sometimes in these instances, kids will get moved without a proper withdrawal form. We've got to be honest. If there is no diversity in the community, as far as parents mixing it up, we can't expect diversity in the classrooms."* -**Wilson High**

**School Teacher**

*"The way it works in [this city] is that you get your parent to call up and do the right networking, and if they know the right people, you can get in certain classes..."* - **Wilson High School**

**Teacher**

*"Some white parents feel like their children are privileged or entitled to take advanced courses even though they are making 'D's. On the other hand, a black student makes a 'B' and their parent comes in like 'Oh, they [the student] aren't doing really well and they don't like the class, let's take him out of it [withdraw]'".* -**Wilson High School Teacher**

*“Some white parents will literally hand guidance their children’s completed schedule with classes and teachers they themselves have selected.” – Wilson High School Teacher*

*“Parents put a lot of pressure on teachers. I see some of the students’ writing and can’t understand how a student can be making a ‘C’ in Honors English with such poor writing skills.”*

*– Wilson High School Guidance Counselor*

Interviews with school faculty have also revealed that some teachers act as supporting elements to racial inequity and thereby hinder racial equality in enrollment within advanced courses. Teacher and Guidance Counselor accounts demonstrate both passive and aggressive, as well as proactive and reactive behaviors of teachers that can be attributed to the lack of diversity in advanced courses at Wilson High School. Two of nine teachers cited student discomfort in advanced courses that were viewed as “white” and exclusive. Three out of nine teachers reported that control over who enrolled in their classes was seen as causes for the lack of diversity in student enrollment in advanced courses. Some teachers exercised their influence on student enrollment by hand picking some students for their classes and rejecting others.



*“Students still go off of the personalities of teachers when deciding what classes to take. The [AP teacher] is not known to be very inclusive or accepting... There are certain groups of students that shy away from her for good reason. She is known for showing preferential treatment, and not for being very welcoming to students of color.” –Wilson High School*

***Teacher***

*“...Teachers can have a lot of control over who is in their class. A lot of teachers are good about networking to make sure that they get certain students and that other students don’t take their class. When I get the roster, I can go to guidance and point to a student’s name and say ‘wait a minute, is he really prepared to take AP?’ This can get students changed in a heartbeat.” –*

***Wilson High School Teacher***

*“I can’t leave out racism. I’m sure there is an underlying layer of that. Teachers almost never proactively recommend students of color for Honors or AP. I must say that I do see the younger teachers making recommendations of students of color.” –*

***Wilson High Guidance Counselor***

*"I think that until AP teachers are trained in how to work with every student, we'll still see enrollment disparity in advanced courses. Most AP students are independent learners so when they [teachers] actually get a student that needs teaching, it's like, 'Oh! What do I do with him?' And these are the types of kids that come from regular track to AP or Honors kids who are not necessarily independent learners, but are really bright."* -

***Wilson High School Guidance Counselor***

*"Teachers are also institutional barriers and that has the biggest impact in [this city]. There is always the issue of who teachers think should or shouldn't be in their class. [Some] teachers do a good job of welcoming regular students into AP, but many don't."* - ***Wilson High School Guidance Counselor***

*"I know students who are not of color who are not prepared for advanced courses who feel entitled to be there. The teachers never question the placement or say, 'this student is misplaced'. But if the student is black and not doing well in and advanced*

*course, teachers will be in my office every week until they are moved.” -Wilson High School Guidance Counselor*

*“...That’s the part that’s very frustrating. It [diversity] could happen naturally, if we just let it. It will never happen if we continue to put up these false barriers. When you put up these barriers; that’s when you defeat the process because then kids don’t want to be in certain classes because they don’t feel comfortable. If every class was alike, then kids would readily sign up for these courses. I think that the biggest element is race- race does matter. Kids are going to go where they feel most comfortable.” -Wilson High School Teacher*

#### **V. Massaged Class Rosters are Kept in Place to the Benefit of Privileged Students and to the Detriment of Minority Students and Diversity**

Interviews with school faculty revealed that at the core of inequities in the enrollment of students of color in advanced courses are a school administration that heavily supports parents over teachers. Many teachers reported feeling excluded and marginal in the decision-making process for individual student course enrollment, and in larger discussions around school policy. These feelings stemmed from instances where teachers felt that their authority had been undermined by both Guidance

Counselors and school administrators as a result of parent's disagreement with a teacher's final decision on student's grades.

*"I think that a lack of diversity in advanced courses and low achievement of students of color can be [attributed] to decreased support of teachers by the school district. The district overvalues parental complaints, and often sides with them over teachers. The blame for disappointing student performance often falls on the teacher, and not on the parent. However, when teachers take action and give students the grades they deserve, no matter how low, parents step in and school officials adhere to their complaints and change things. Who benefits from this- truly not the student that got a grade they didn't deserve?" -Wilson*

***High School Teacher***

*"Parents place blame on teachers – administrators side with parents over teachers and only seem to take action on behalf of issues that parents raise. Parents make phone calls to guidance and manipulate student schedules so that they end up in the classes they want with the teachers they want." –Wilson*

***School Teacher***

Guidance Counselors who are expected to be the neutral enforcers of school enrollment policy are also exerting their judgments and biases on students to favor influential parents, and this is believed to also influence the strategic segregation of advanced courses. Many respondents reported that white parents are catered to due to threats to take their children out of Wilson High School and enroll them in private school.

*“Students are moved from [classes] without a withdrawal form. Guidance just does it in the computer. The same way they’ll just register 38 students in [a] class without...the teacher finding out until [the students] show up for class and don’t have a place to sit in a classroom that seats 31 students, and that already has 30 students enrolled. Guidance is a big problem at this school. They are totally incompetent. They just do what they want to do.” -Wilson High School Teacher*

*“[One time a student] had chronic absenteeism, had failed by 2 points, didn’t show up for the final, but their white parent screamed and made such a fuss that someone in guidance, or the main office [principal], gave him a passing grade. [The student’s*

*teacher] only found out the student's grade had been changed because [that student's teacher knew the student's] next year's teacher. Guidance nor the principal ever discussed the situation with [the teacher that assigned the original grade]. Don't you think [the teacher], I should know what grade this student earned in [the] class?" -Wilson High School Teacher*

**VI. Teachers & Guidance Counselors View the Enrollment Process Somewhat Differently – With Teachers “Blaming” Guidance Counselors for Racial Disparity and Vice Versa**

Different perspectives of the way that course enrollment is executed has created a finger pointing effect within Wilson High School. Teachers blame Guidance Counselors for inconsistently administered policy and for massaging class rosters to cave to parent's demands, and Guidance Counselors blame teachers for being inconsistent with recommending students for advanced courses; meanwhile both blame school administrators and school district officials for allowing parents to be so instrumental and disruptive to policy enforcement. In particular, minority teacher respondents (about 1/3 of teachers interviewed), felt that they were ineffective at efforts towards creating classroom diversity because a mostly white administration had the needs and concerns of their white faculty and white students and parents at the forefront of any school based initiative.

All Guidance Counselors pointed to teacher's often subjective mislabeling of both gifted and non-gifted students. School officials often view students through stereotypical lenses; often perceiving white and Asian middle class students as more advanced, and black and Hispanic students as average or remedial performers – most often despite their social class. Two of three Guidance Counselors also pointed to minority parental ignorance about their power to influence their children's academic careers as sources of black and Hispanic enrollment disparity in advanced courses. This measure conveys guidance counselor's expectations, if not acceptance, of some degree of parental influence.

The majority of teachers thought that student's could be placed in an advanced course as a result of the teacher's recommendation, or the student's self recommendation. However, Guidance Counselors describe a more holistic approach to the advanced course selection/enrollment process that in theory and practice leaves room for more subjective assessment of student aptitude and ability, and room for resourceful parents to be able to argue for their child's admittance into advanced courses and override a teacher's recommendation. It may be helpful to note that although neither explanation of how student enrollment in advanced courses works is consistent with Wilson High School's Open Enrollment Policy; teacher's explanations are closer to the policy's actual intent as it is written.

*"I've got a top-notch student that was recommended for AP Calculus, AP English, AP Government, AP Latin, and Honors Physics by his teachers. Once we [the guidance Office] have that information, that's only one component of the process. That's just the teacher's recommendation, and if the student expresses interest, then we also look at the student's grades to see if they should go to an advanced course. If we think that the student has that ability, then we go ahead with the recommendation. Many times teachers are disappointed that a student didn't end up where they recommended them to be. They don't understand that this is only their recommendation." -Wilson High School Guidance Counselor*

*"I don't want students to fail. I won't place them where I don't think that they belong. So I'll speak with the teachers and I'll place the students with teachers that I think will work with the students. For example, they may have a particular weakness in one area, but otherwise are really bright. I may tweak those schedules to best benefit those students." --Wilson High School Guidance Counselor*



*"I used to [attribute] kids leaving my class to teaching style. Some kids prefer my teaching style over the other AP teachers' styles and vice versa. But as of late, I've really been attributing more of the lateral transfers coming from the principal to race because I can see patterns in the kinds of kids that were leaving my class, and the kinds of students that they [guidance] were filling in my class. They are putting the minority kids in the minority teacher's room, and they are stacking all of the white kids in the white teacher's rooms. That's what I think. It really makes you sick. It will make you angry! I can walk past these rooms and see it."* **–Wilson High School Teacher**

*"Parents with more social networks are manipulating administrators. [Some teachers] refuse to teach honors because the school pressures teachers to change grades for kids whose parents are extremely difficult. Two fold when you teach honors and you're black: parents assume you don't know the material. Fellow colleagues think that minority teachers aren't smart enough or qualified to teach AP/Honors. [Some minority teachers] receive this negativity from parents, students, fellow*

*colleagues, and of course you get it from administration.*

*Sometimes they'd rather die than give an AP or Honors class to a minority teacher. At [the district's middle school] a few years ago it was a practice to make teachers rotate and teach Honors classes even if they primarily taught regular courses. I liked this model. The kids got to see all of their teachers teaching the 'smart' classes." -Wilson High School Teacher*

*"Teachers of color are charged with handling the discipline problem children, the special education children, so administrators try to save these kids for black teachers to keep them in check, to teach them something, administrators claim black teachers are most effective on these types of students." - Wilson High School Teacher*

### **Summary**

Wilson High School is in the midst of discussing numerous structural problems that plague an older, deteriorating school building. Besides being at its capacity with students, often enrolling more than suggested numbers in overflowing classes, teachers often operate sharing classrooms and roll their supplies around on carts because they don't have classrooms of their own. Teachers and Guidance counselors also referenced

failing cooling and heating systems that make for an overall uncomfortable working environment. Although the school is in the process of constructing a newer structure, some teachers claim that these working conditions act as a distraction, rendering many teachers unable to think about school reform, and injustice beyond the injustices of their own mobile classrooms, overcrowded classrooms, and cold and overly warm classrooms.

Teachers in the study were in unanimous agreement about what makes a good student. Teachers believed that students with good reading, writing, and vocabulary skills made for high-performing students. Students who also did their work in a timely manner and took risks by giving answers to questions they weren't sure were correct, and participated in class were also cited as characteristics of good students. However, all teachers in the study, and two of three Guidance Counselors claimed that not all of the students, (mostly white), currently taking advanced courses could be described as "good" students.

Notably, all white teachers in the study cited getting along with teachers as characteristics of good students. This suggests that teachers are more willing to view students with whom they can relate to and get along with, positively. Considering the literature that addresses cultural capital, and which group's cultural capital is valued in school, clearly, white, middle-class students have the advantage over students whose cultural capital is not valued by mainstream school environments. Students with mainstream cultural capital have the ability to transfer this capital into social capital

where teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators, all work to ensure that certain students perform as their cultural and social capital and background suggests they should. These social capital bridges may help to explain how some seemingly undeserving students are ending up in places where their grades, motives, and temperament, suggests they do not belong.

Teachers unanimously agreed that students do not make the connection between what they do now, and how their choices affect their futures. However, all teachers also acknowledged that transferable cultural capital in the form of individual student interaction with teachers, and mostly parental interaction with teachers and other school officials, were assisting in navigating seemingly clueless students through the educational process at Wilson High School.

Eight of nine teachers reported feeling disrespected, unsupported, and ineffective because of numerous instances of grade changing, student withdrawals without proper documentation, and lateral transfers between classes – all policies that require that specific standard operating procedures be followed. These teachers reported that changes were made upon parent's requests, and that parent's who "know how to work the system" had a great deal of influence over the school, in most instances rendering teachers powerless. All Guidance Counselors interviewed in this study acknowledged having decision making power that overrides student's decisions about where they place themselves – in essence trumping supposed student placement autonomy as stated in the Open Enrollment Policy.

Ultimately student agency is greatly compromised by the power of teachers, guidance counselors, and other student's parents to have influence on class composition – ultimately fueling the landscape for classroom segregation, and advanced courses racial stratification within schools. The school itself begins to mimic the greater society as individuals (students) whose parents have power and influence are considered top tier students; with top academic accolades, access to the most prestigious classes, and subsequently admission to the nation's best schools and college programs. This research provokes the question, *where does this cycle of inequality end?* Decisions made as prematurely as elementary school have long-lasting ramifications that extend beyond high school. Decision making for students is done by individuals who may or may not have their best interests in mind, but are charged with protecting and acting as educational advocates for all students.

Research has uncovered that the problem of enrollment disparity of students in advanced courses at Wilson High School has consequences that extend beyond the institutional barriers that interviews with teachers and guidance counselors revealed in themselves, other school faculty, and parents. By allowing parents to continuously manipulate class rosters, school faculty protocol, and even affecting in-class discussion and learning, there is an uneven balance in whose children benefit from parental influence. Besides students not taking advantage of AP and Honors programs, there are parents acting as influencers on children's education. By being so involved, parents are unbeknownst to themselves acting as barriers to other children whose parents don't

have access and the knowledge to advocate for their children in schools, and who have seemingly less bargaining power as a result of less social capital.

## Conclusion

At the onset of this investigation, I expected that individual teachers themselves were not fostering exclusive environments, therefore allowing for a lack of diversity to persist at the high school. Instead, I suggested that the school's policies, such as Open Enrollment were problematic because having a policy such as this glossed over the true pathology and hid the real reasons why students of color were underrepresented in advanced courses. I thought that policies such as Open Enrollment were dismissive of the lack of preparation for advanced courses in high school that students may be dealing with due to not being identified in GAT programs at the elementary level. After conducting interviews with teachers and guidance counselors at this school, my findings suggest that the *implementation* of various policies are what are contributing to enrollment disparity in advanced courses at this school. Teachers and guidance counselor interviews reveal that many school officials subjectively decide to waywardly implement policies for parents that know "what buttons to push". Many white middle class parents are successful in advocating for their students to be tested for GAT, accepted into GAT, have high school grades changed and raised, and for their children to receive specific teachers, and gain admittance into specific courses.

Interviews with school teachers and guidance counselors revealed that the reason that the Open Enrollment Policy appeared to be ineffective is that parents, teachers, and guidance counselors all influenced it in varying amounts and in inconsistent ways. This study has found that the lack of diversity in advanced courses

at this high school is greater than black and Hispanic students not being admitted into GAT.

What is damaging is that many of the cultural norms of parents of color allow them to believe that school is still a meritocracy. If their child is gifted and merits testing for an accelerated program, they trust that the proper, qualified, school official will let them know. If their child receives a bad grade, they trust that it is because that's what their child earned. If guidance counselors enroll their child in a specific class, with a randomly assigned teacher, black and Hispanic parents may just assume that this is where their child is supposed to be. White parents have seemingly good intentions and are trying to ensure that their children receive a good education. However, these intentions lead to inequities starting with some white students' admittance to GAT, and ultimately extend to how the school is able to execute policy.

Initial class assignments often yield a very diverse class group. When parents start making phone calls and requesting overrides and lateral transfers and admittance into accelerated courses, by the time classes are two weeks underway, their demographic looks starkly different. Not everyone's parents are making phone calls, so some students, mostly black and Hispanic students are left in non-honors classes together, or advanced courses with minority teachers. These things are not said to imply that black and Hispanic students can not learn together, can not have a successful class without their white classmates, or fewer of them, or can not learn from minority teachers



. Yet, it leads one to wonder what other unknown access or privileges are white student's social capital gaining them?

Ramifications for students who don't have exposure to advanced courses in high school were evidenced in Jeanie Oakes (1985) study of elementary schools. Oakes concluded that "it is clear that both the knowledge presented and the intellectual processes cultivated in English classes and the access to mathematical content in math classes were quite different at different track levels (78)." She argues that the knowledge that the high track classes received was preparing students for the future and that because of the "omission of certain content from low-track classes, students in effect were denied the opportunity to learn material essential for mobility among track levels (78)." This immobility causes students to be stuck in a cycle of low-achievement which further hinders their attainment of educational power and success. By allowing some parents actions to dictate how students are navigated through high school, some students without the social capital and parents advocating for them are left immobile. Oakes' study suggests that Open Enrollment would in fact be an ineffective solution to advanced courses enrollment disparity because the majority of students not exposed to high track classes materials would be unable to effectively enroll in advanced courses because the content in the general track would not prepare them to do so (1985).

The Lareau et al. (1998) study concluded that black parents had difficulty advocating for their children in school settings because they were not positive and supportive towards teachers. Black parents often criticized educators directly, and as a

result they were met with negative reactions from school officials. My study suggests in fact, that many black parents are showing too much deference to the school and to school officials. Their inability to, or unwillingness to challenge placements and grades, like white parents do, may be keeping their students among the periphery and excluded from the most competitive academic discourse taking place within the school.

In addition, the Wells and Serna (1996) study found that it is often that the community surrounding the school is resistant to changes that could impact the demographics of the school community. Their study analyzed the political and cultural ideals that prohibited seemingly progressive and altruistic school movements. Similarly to what interview respondents in this case study reported, Wells and Serna (1996) uncovered that the interests of a select group were more heavily weighed than others when determining what actions to take. However, it is problematic because public schools are not supposed to have private interests. Unfortunately both this case study and the Wells and Serna (1996) study found evidence that they do have private interests.

Guidance counselors interviewed in the study cited mislabeling and misidentification of gifted students as problematic in this school district. Yet, they themselves acknowledged their own subjectivity in deciding if the Open Enrollment policy should in fact leave certain courses closed or off limits to students whom they do not want to see make a poor grade because they may not be prepared for the rigor of advanced courses (mostly black and Hispanic students). Having guidance counselors acting as an inconsistent, subjective layer that is shuffling around course schedules and

not admitting students who they think are not worthy into advanced courses, is negatively affecting the implementation of a policy put in place to ward off these idiosyncrasies. Teachers identify some of their colleagues as seeing the promise in some students, mainly white and middle class, and only focusing on what's lacking in others – mainly poor and minority. Their subjective opinions about students are also damaging integration in the classrooms at Wilson High School.

Racial discrimination is operating on many different levels at Wilson High School and is hampering minority students from utilizing the Open Enrollment policy to gain access to the school's advanced courses. At the individual level, many white, middle class white parents and school officials have perceptions of what makes a good student and what is a good class. Often these evaluations are a translation of what is valued in their shared culture, or a further exchange of mainstream cultural capital. Interviews revealed that teachers perceived that many white parents equated a "good" class at Wilson High School as a white class; or one where the teacher and students were white. Parents seem not to value the diversity of the student body and in turn are encouraging a school within a school.

Further, at the individual level, racism is operating within the classroom as teachers have revealed to a small degree racialized and stereotypical perceptions of some students based on their race and / or class. Theories of social capital evidence that these teachers may be less willing to be the social bridges and navigators for minority students through school since they don't feel comfortable with these students and can

not identify with them. Particularly damaging may be the case of the black working class male student. Black working class male students have been described as “angry”, a stereotype perpetuated by mainstream media. Future research could examine the intersection of race, class, and gender in teacher's and parent's perceptions of students (e.g., Dance 2002). The investigation could collect and analyze the perceptions of school officials about different groups of students and how these perceptions affect diversity outcomes in advanced courses.

In addition to two levels of individual racial discrimination, at the macro level, relationships between the school and community were assessed by respondents as being pivotal in establishing advanced courses diversity at Wilson High School. White, middle class parents’ threats to take their children out of Wilson High School if their children were not given access to the courses and teachers that they wanted, perpetuates a school within a school and furthers the private interests of these groups. A core finding of my research was that parental involvement heavily influences decision making and course enrollment. It was further found that parental involvement occurs at varying levels of frequency based on the class and race of a student, and this leads to inequities in decision making, and decision making that benefits only those groups whose parents are the most active or involved with the school. Future research should attempt to ascertain whether parental involvement in schools is a cultural or class phenomenon. My research suggests that there may be some deeply rooted class and

cultural norms that affect how parent's perceive the roles of teachers, guidance counselors , and themselves in the child's education.

It is difficult, if unfair, to tell concerned, active parents, to butt out of their children's education and let schools do what they are in place to do, be 'the great equalizers' (Bowles and Gintis, 1981). It is difficult to tell parents that their influence is making for an even further unequal landscape. It is difficult to tell parents already strapped for money, and strapped for time, to be more active in their child's education. Many lower or working class parents don't feel comfortable questioning school officials, because of a lack of higher education themselves. However, it is easy to tell a school to be more objective in their implementation of policy.

When teachers were asked why school officials bent seemingly so easily for certain parents, many (nine respondents out of 12) said because school officials know that if they dissolve the school within a school, many of the school's "best and brightest" will be withdrawn entirely and enrolled in private school. School officials feared that the withdrawal of middle - to upper -class white students would cause a dearth of resources for the school, and they'd be left with the lower performing, regular track, lower-class, and minority students. School officials fear what would become of the school if the neglected periphery, was forced to become its core. However, I ask, are the schools "best and brightest" only so because they've been labeled so, had the social capital to be able to tell others they were so, and used social capital to convince even more others that they were so? If the school were to invest in a true meritocracy, and

not allow parents to influence student placement without quantifiable evidence and reason, would all of these students still be the best and the brightest? My solution is that the only way to know is to try, for as stated by Chief Justice Earl Warren 50 years ago in 1954, *"To separate [the nation's black schoolchildren] from others of similar age and qualification because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their habits and minds in a way very unlikely ever to be undone."*

## Appendix A

### Teacher and Guidance Counselor Perceptions of Classroom Diversity in Advanced Courses Informed Consent Form

I am in good physical health, and wish to participate in a program of research being conducted by Karolyn Eworo-Enfumo, a graduate student at the University of Maryland. I further state that:

**\* I am over 18 years of age, or,**

**\* I am under 18 years of age but have parental permission to participate in this study.**

The purpose of this research is to better understand the classroom compositions of advanced courses at T.C. Williams High School. More specifically, the researcher is interested in high school faculty perceptions about Advanced Placement / Honors programs and student enrollment in courses at this school.

The researcher will be conducting one on one interviews with school teachers and guidance counselors that will last for approximately one hour and will be scheduled at the participant's leisure. School officials (teachers, counselors, academy leaders, etc.) will not be present during individual interviews, and although individual interview sessions may be tape recorded, I understand that Karolyn will not make these tapes available to school officials.

I understand that all information collected in the study is strictly confidential. The information or data that I provide may be grouped with data others provide for reporting and presentation. The information I provide may only be shared with other researchers involved in this project, however, my name will be changed to hide or conceal my identity. I also understand that I am free to ask questions or to withdraw participation at any time without penalty. I also understand that a risk that may result from this research project is that sensitive information may be inadvertently disclosed. But as mentioned above, I understand that my name will be kept confidential and all interview information will be locked and secured by the researcher.

If I would like to participate in this study, I must indicate that I have read, understood, and agree to the terms of this Informed Consent Agreement by signing the consent form below. If I would like more information or have any questions about this study, I understand that I can contact the researcher Karolyn Eworo-Enfumo at (240) 274-4563.

***Informed Consent Agreement***

*I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read, understood, and agreed to the above terms and  
(print your name)*

*I agree to participate in Karolyn Eworo-Enfumo's interviews conducted in conjunction with the  
Collegiate Course Preparation Diversity Committee at T.C. Williams High School.*

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*(Signature of Interviewee)*

*Date*



## Appendix B

### *Questions for Teachers*

- 1) What kind of control or influence do you have over who enrolls in and remains in your class during the year?
- 2) How important is having influence or control over who takes your class to the overall success of the class?
- 3) How much influence do you have over student's enrollment in other classes for the next school year?
- 4) How culturally diverse would you say that your class is now? How do you think it got that way?
- 5) Why do you think students enroll in your class?
- 6) Why do you think students drop your class?
- 7) Do you usually have a conversation with students prior to them dropping your class?
- 8) Can you provide me some examples of what you might say in such a conversation? What might a student say?
- 9) What happens when a student brings you a withdrawal form?
- 10) Do they sometimes get moved without a form?
- 11) What do you know about Wilson High School's Open Enrollment Policy?
- 12) Do you think that students are aware of this policy?
- 13) Which students appear to be the most aware of this policy?
- 14) What do you know about the Collegiate Course Preparation Diversity Committee?
- 15) What do you think about what they are doing?

- 16) Are there currently students enrolled in AP/Honors courses that haven't displayed the aptitude needed for these advanced level courses?
- 17) If yes (to question #16), how would you say they got enrolled in these classes?
- 18) Are there some students not currently enrolled in advanced courses that should be?
- 19) Why do you think that they are not currently taking advanced courses?
- 20) How does your teaching style include students for whom English is a second language?
- 21) How well do students make the link between what they do now, and how these choices affect their future?

#### *Questions for Guidance Counselors*

- 1) Do you typically make recommendations for advanced courses or do students arrive in your office knowing that these are the classes that they should take?
- 2) If yes (to question #1), on what basis do you make these recommendations?
- 3) Do you usually have a conversation with students prior to them
- 4) dropping an advanced class?
- 5) Can you provide me some examples of what you might say in such a conversation? What might a student say?
- 6) Are students receptive to these conversations?
- 7) How much career counseling would you say students at Wilson High School receive on average?
- 8) What is the process for helping students enroll in classes; or how do you help students enroll in classes?
- 9) Do most students have an idea about what they want to take and in what sequence they should take classes?

- 10) Do most students and/or parents appear to be aware of T.C. William's Open Enrollment Policy?
- 11) Which students appear to be the most aware of the Open Enrollment Policy?
- 12) What happens when a student wants to drop an AP/Honors class? Do they get a withdrawal form?
- 13) Do students sometimes get moved without a form?
- 14) What do you know about the AP/Honors Diversity Committee?
- 15) What do you think about what they are doing?
- 16) What characteristics do students that appear to be the most prepared for life after high school have?
- 17) How well do students make the link between what they do now, and how these choices affect their future?
- 18) How much parental involvement is there in the course selection process?
- 19) What characteristics do involved parents have?
- 20) What characteristics do students have that typically enroll in AP/Honors classes?
- 21) Are there currently students enrolled in AP/Honors courses that haven't displayed the aptitude needed for these advanced level courses?
- 22) If yes (to question #20), how would you say they got enrolled in these classes?
- 23) Are there some students not currently enrolled in advanced courses that should be?
- 24) Why do you think that they are not currently taking advanced courses?

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