

**INEQUITIES AND DISPARITIES IN EDUCATION**

Anonymous Teacher

To Whom It May Concern:

I am on my seventh year as an elementary educator in Washington State. I have taught K-2<sup>nd</sup> grade but have spent the majority of my years teaching Kindergarten at a Title I school located in inner city Seattle in the largest district in our state—Seattle Public Schools (SPS). Through this experience, I gained a unique insight regarding the inequities amongst our students of color, which was 80-90% of the school population.

While I'm unable to speak to all of the insight I have gained (without actually writing a book) from multiple sources—administration, district, fellow colleagues, parents and community members—I will do my best to provide a glimpse into what I *do* know and have *experienced*.

This school's neighborhood was the former home of the Black Panthers and meetings were held in a local park. In fact, the school's mascot is the Panthers. This same neighborhood is and has been experiencing gentrification over the past 10-15 years, driving out almost every black family within the radius of the school. The caveat is that the housing contracts still have verbiage about "red zoning" in them when people purchase a home. That is, at one time, black families were legally allowed to buy or own a home only in this neighborhood. These are the same homes that have now been bought out by affluent white families, and therefore are turning a very "black" neighborhood into a very "white" neighborhood. Yet, the majority of the white families that live directly across from my former school send their children to private school instead of their neighborhood school right across the street because the majority of our students are black, or historically have been black students. The Central District (CD) of Seattle is literally blocks up the street from this very affluent neighborhood.

The downside for our school was a decrease of enrollment school-wide. We could fit up to 500+ students K-8, but we only had 250-300 K-8 most years. The district was not helpful in advertising our school as an option. We often had events inviting neighborhood families to our school to visit the

classroom to meet us, the teachers and other school staff. At this point we were also highly encouraged by our principal to sell our school, ourselves, and our experience of the school. We were also told to purposefully leave out the part about the screaming children and the families that come from trauma, drug addiction and more, who often need breaks, and/or step time to cuss, scream, etc., in the hallways every day.

Through community forums and parent meetings, we learned that even if a family moved in across the street from the school, the enrollment coordinators at the District seemed to intentionally *not* direct families to this school and instead sent them to other local schools nearby. Some of our families were frustrated and upset to learn this neighborhood school was practically right across the street from their home, yet District did not even mention it to them.

This is just one of the many strange, unjust, and unfair challenges that we constantly faced and were up against. It literally felt like a movie, and I still feel like I have PTSD some days. From everything, the politics and injustices from district level on down, to school, and the day-to-day challenges in the classroom.

Our school was often referred to (amongst staff only) as the “drop zone school” or other similar names. This meant that when kids (generally middle school students) were expelled from other schools or districts, they would send them to us. Moreover, there was a year I received a new student mid-year, an incoming kindergarten student whose father was known to be unsafe. I received a warning from my principal via a district security officer of a previous assault by this student’s father on his teacher at their former school. I was instructed to “deal” with him the best I could for the remainder of the school year. SPS security met with my principal and me at the time, and spoke with us regularly about this family and asked whether or not the father was behaving himself. This security officer admitted that the district shouldn’t have allowed him another chance—to be allowed on any school campus, to show up, and to be present dropping off and picking up his son daily—but decided to give him one anyways, despite not just one previous incident but many. Security also decided that my former school was the place they would give him that second chance. As if

we didn't already have enough challenges to face: students coming from poverty, homelessness, gang lineage, refugee families, drug addiction, foster homes, and neglect. This same security officer offered to buy my principal and me drinks if we said "yes" and accepted this family. I am all for second chances, but as this child's classroom teacher who knew about his father's harassing and abusive past—he had the former teacher "jumped" after school—I pondered what, if anything, was being done to ensure my safety. I knew that I needed to feel safe too and had a family to go home to each night as well, not just be assured that security would buy me drinks at the end of the year if all went well.

This is just one of many, many injustices. There are too many to discuss or speak to—injustices for both teachers and students. One injustice regarding students involved students who were or are on Individual Education Plans (IEPs). There are students with IEPs that are sanctioned/protected by the federal government/law. These students must legally receive care, and have their "minutes" met on their IEPs (time either in class with support or out of class with support). Yet there were so many months and years that we were not only without a "resource room" teacher (i.e., a special education teacher), but also without a substitute to cover the position while we waited for someone to hopefully take the job. The teachers we did have leftover were not good at their jobs and knew they needed to leave. It is an underfunded and overworked position so at times I didn't blame them. However, this still doesn't solve the fact that these children weren't getting the support they needed or that legally the school or District was in violation of federal law. I always wondered about this; what do we do if no one could find a teacher to fill the position? With that said, I also learned that SPS refused to allow "out-of-district" substitute teachers. This meant that I was able to get hired as a teacher in the district despite not having student-taught in district, but was not allowed to be a substitute teacher for them. This was district policy that didn't make any sense. Every teacher and principal I spoke with about this at the time said it was horrible; that they need to allow out-of-district substitutes, we need substitutes, etc. No other local district does this, only Seattle.

This was a common theme I noticed about SPS though. There were a lot of things that didn't make sense. The politics and bureaucracy of SPS are real. It's such a broken system, which is extremely disheartening, and therefore it is difficult to fight on the ground or classroom level. There are too many deep and systemic issues: lack of leadership, brokenness, corruption, etc., none of which are being addressed. Dysfunction trickles down into the schools, our classrooms, and eventually impacts actual people, our precious children to be specific—my deserving students. This trickle-down effect is particularly felt at Title I schools across the board.

Of course, I'm at more liberty to say now and express my challenges and concerns now that I'm not employed by SPS. I am excited to share my voice for all. I know that my voice is not just my own but the voice of so many others. It is a voice for my students and for all children being affected, the voice of fellow educators, administrators, parents, families, and any or all staff members serving or teaching children in a school setting or workplace on a regular basis.

I have a final thought regarding inequities, particularly at inner city schools and under resourced schools and areas. The Accelerated Progress Program (APP) is an advanced learning program. It requires advanced testing which is a service provided by SPS that every school is supposed to offer. This advanced and intense testing is administered as early as Kindergarten and is generally advertised every school year at "every" school. This is an opportunity to track students through high school by providing them advanced classes, or extra and more advanced academic work. This also provides them the opportunity to transfer to the exclusive APP schools if desired. There are only 2 main APP schools in district, I believe. If accepted in this program, for which a student must score high in both reading and math, the student will be tracked through high school then offered advanced classes in high school without question. This program inadvertently—or maybe not inadvertently, but instead provides a solid argument for a direct example of institutionalized segregation—creates segregation, amongst schools and amongst students.

I've spoken with former parents whose children attend the local high school (also in the inner city) and they say that

students in these APP programs attend separate classes, therefore attending the “white” part of the school, with white students in the advanced classes. This is separate from the “black” part of the school in all of the general education classes with majority black students. This mother went on to explain to me that there was literally a black PTA (parent-teacher association) and a white PTA. This is current day. The irony in all of this and the discouraging and unacceptable part is that this APP program, offered at “all” schools by the district, was not being offered or advertised for four of the five years I taught at my former school. The fifth year I taught there, the application process to have your child tested for this program finally went home in the beginning of the year paperwork and was offered in the front office. There was some advocacy being done, in an effort for our school with majority black students to receive the same opportunities as all of the white students at other schools. To date, the APP program and schools are majority white with some students of Asian descent but very few black students.

- Anonymous Teacher; advocating for teachers, parents and students, particularly under resourced families, children, and children of color.