

## United States fact sheet – 2020 GEM Report

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United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



### Persistence of exclusion:

One in three students in the USA reported feeling like outsiders in school.

In the United States, 12.5% of lesbian, gay and bisexual students reported not going to school at least once in the previous 30 days because they felt unsafe at or on their way to and from school, compared with less than 4.6% of heterosexual students.

Students at risk of being stereotyped may fear confirming a negative stereotype. This feeling has a negative impact on test performance. A study in the United States showed that presenting a reading test as a diagnostic of abilities adversely affected the performance of African-American children, who were aware of racial stereotypes.

Exclusion can happen throughout the school cycle: Counsellors can play an important role in steering young people towards tertiary education. However, services are often not targeted where needed. In the United States, students who benefit from one-on-one counselling are more than three times as likely to attend college and almost seven times as likely to apply for financial aid. Yet too few students benefit: The median number of students per counsellor is 455, nearly twice the recommended 250:1 ratio. Spatial distribution of access to counsellors is inequitable. College guidance is often inadequate or non-existent in rural secondary schools.

Recognizing and accepting diversity is an important challenge. Counsellors' perceptions, sociocultural biases and gender stereotypes can affect students' education and career choices. This may explain some of women's under-representation in tertiary science, technology, engineering and mathematics. An online random survey of high school counsellors in the US state of Wisconsin found that, even though they believed female students outperformed males in mathematics and were more likely to succeed, they were less likely to recommend mathematics over English to female students. White counsellors may underestimate the quality of historically black colleges and universities and fail to make appropriate recommendations to black students.

In-service training and continuing education can help counsellors identify and correct discriminatory guidance. In school districts with large minority student populations, counsellors are trained in early identification and support for students with potential for tertiary education. Other interventions seek to support underprepared college-oriented students. College access programmes, for instance, may encourage disadvantaged grade 9 minority students to be more ambitious in their choice of classes in order to meet college admission requirements

### Segregation

In the United States, the 1968 desegregation policy led to a rapid decline in the share of black students attending intensely segregated schools (where at least 90% of the student population belonged to a minority group). However, the share increased in all regions between 1991 and 2011, especially in the South, where more than half of black students live: There the share increased from 26% to 34%, although the South remains the least segregated region. The highest share was observed in the north-east (51%).

The contentious debate about whether schools in the United States are desegregating or re-segregating hinges on the difference between the extent to which groups are evenly distributed and the extent to which they are exposed to each other. In Providence, Rhode Island, the share of schools with 90% or more minority students increased from 36% in 2000 to 74% in 2015. Yet segregation decreased in terms of even distribution of groups across schools.

Policies to counter residential and school segregation must take their complex interaction into account. In San Francisco, California, families from historically disadvantaged neighbourhoods get a bonus in the school lottery that increases their chance of getting their first choice. Inadvertently, this benefits middle-class families who are gentrifying these neighbourhoods; they receive the bonus on top of their existing advantage and make more ambitious and strategic choices in the lottery than their neighbours who are the intended beneficiaries.

In the United States, a range of school choice policies contribute to growing segregation by income and race. An evaluation of a policy in Chicago that tried to increase information to poor families about school quality showed that, while such families left failing schools, they went to other low-performing schools. When white parents choose schools, they use racial composition and factors for which race is a proxy, such as school safety, quality of facilities and academic performance. In 11 southern states where a major desegregation effort took place in the late 1960s in response to the civil rights movement, those gains have been eroding, owing partly to demographic trends related to immigration and partly to school choice policies. The share of black students attending a school with less than 10% white students rose, from 23% in 1980 to 36% in 2014

While antisocial behaviour can significantly disrupt learning for all, removing students interferes with their education progression and can perpetuate a failure cycle, culminating in prison. In the United States, through zero-tolerance measures, such as mandatory suspension and law enforcement referral, schools in disadvantaged areas may initiate a so-called school-to-prison pipeline. A discretionary suspension or expulsion nearly triples the likelihood of a student being in contact with juvenile justice in the following year. Adults who as students went to schools with above-average suspension rates experienced 15% to 20% higher incarceration rates. High suspension rates also negatively affect education attainment.

Children are funnelled into the juvenile and criminal justice systems for often minor infractions. Such disciplinary policies disproportionately affect black students, who represent 31% of school-related arrests, around twice their share of the student body, and are suspended and expelled three times as often as white students. In a Mississippi school district, children as young as 10 were routinely arrested and taken to jail in handcuffs whenever teachers requested. Some were held for days before being given access to a lawyer. At schools in the district, including special schools, students were suspended and expelled for more than 10 days at 7 times the state rate. Black girls were strongly affected, representing the fastest-growing group in the juvenile justice system. Unlike their white peers, they received out-of-school rather than in-school suspensions. Nationwide, 9.6% of black girls in public primary and secondary schools received out-of-school suspensions in 2013/14, compared with 1.7% of white girls.

The high rate of exclusion of special needs students underscores the need for more proactive behavioural supports to prevent further marginalization and exacerbation of education difficulties. In the United States, one study suggested that 19.5% of students with disabilities had been suspended at least once in the academic year. Nationwide, the out-of-school suspension rate of students with disabilities (10.6%) was twice as high as the national average (5.3%). Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty and neglect; they should benefit from

additional education and counselling services, not face zero-tolerance policies. Even when students were extremely disruptive, teachers may have provoked or escalated the behaviour, and school rules may have been inappropriate. The New York Police Department recently signed a policy limiting police officers' responsibilities in the New York City public schools – the nation's largest district, serving 1.1 million students. The policy is part of a school climate effort that includes hiring 285 new school social workers. Out-of-school suspensions will be limited and support provided for educators to practice positive discipline techniques.

**Inequitable foundations:** In the United States, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was seen as guaranteeing the right to special education, but a 1997 amendment reinterpreted the right as specially designed instruction to ensure access to the general curriculum.

### **Curriculum and textbooks can exclude too**

Native American peoples: In a national survey in the United States, 72% of respondents said significant changes to the curriculum on Native American history and culture were needed. According to teachers, 'history of Native American peoples' and 'pre-Columbian American history and culture' have worse coverage and accuracy than any other subjects (First Nations Development Institute, 2018). Another survey, conducted in 28 states, 26 of which had federally recognized tribal nations, indicated that only 12 required Native American material to be taught in some or all public school grades.

Indigenous peoples: In the United States, 87% of national and state history standards related to indigenous peoples focus on pre-1900 history, limiting discussion and representation of indigenous peoples. Of existing state standards, 17 had no post-1900 indigenous standards

Women: In the United States, a study of introductory economics textbooks found that 18% of characters mentioned were female, mostly portrayed in relation to food, fashion or entertainment (Stevenson and Zlotnick, 2018). A report on how women's history was reflected in pre-primary, primary and secondary social studies found that 53% of mentions of women in state standards referred to domestic and family roles and 2% to entry into the workforce

LGBTI: In the United States, the 2017 GLSEN School Climate survey found that two-thirds of students had not been exposed to representation of LGBTI people and history in school. It also found that students in schools with inclusive curricula were less likely to feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation (42% vs 63%) or to be often or frequently exposed to biased language (52% vs 75%).

California was the first US state to introduce a regulatory framework for inclusion of LGBTI people's contributions in history and social science curricula. In 2019, Colorado, Illinois, New Jersey and Oregon followed. By contrast, seven states have discriminatory curriculum laws. South Carolina's school board guidelines on sexuality education say that 'the program of instruction ... may not include a discussion of alternate sexual lifestyles from heterosexual relationships'. The Texas Health and Safety Code states that sexuality education content should emphasize 'that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense' under state law. Discriminatory language can also be found in the state's education regulations and curriculum guidelines. In Utah, civil society mobilization led to the repeal of a statutory prohibition against 'advocacy of homosexuality' as a step towards stopping discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in public schools

### **More human and material resources are needed for inclusion**

Finance: In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act says the federal government must provide each state with 40% of the per-student expenditure multiplied by the number of special education students. In fact, it provides only 18%, and the states make up the shortfall. Some analyses have attributed part of the growth in expenditure to districts responding to funding mechanisms that encourage increasing the number of students with disabilities. Additional support for students with disabilities is provided at the state level by various funding mechanisms and combinations thereof. In total, 27 states apply either a single weight to the general funding formula for mainstream schools or multiple weights (e.g. by type of impairment or instructional arrangement required). Eight states distribute resources, such as support personnel or specialists, instead of money, based on the number of students requiring special education services. Five states reimburse districts for all or part of their spending. One in four states provides additional funding for very-high-cost students. For instance, Florida combines multiple weights and additional funding for high-cost students. It ranks students in five support levels and awards districts 3.7 and 5.6 times more for each student at support levels 4 and 5, respectively

In California, the funding mechanism avoided creating incentives to increase the number of students with special needs, but the number rose nevertheless, and overall funding levels did not keep pace. A state wide special education task force recommended a funding increase and a stronger focus on integrating special education into mainstream primary and secondary education. It also proposed abolishing the parallel system of special education governance and distributing released funds to districts instead. In Vermont, rising costs led to a 2018 reform to accelerate integration of children with special needs into mainstream classrooms, where they would receive targeted instructional time. The changes are being rolled out without increased funding; the funding mechanism is moving away from reimbursements to block grants, increasing flexibility in how money is spent. The reform discourages using paraeducators in favour of highly skilled professionals to support all learners.

Teachers: Teachers may not be immune to social biases and stereotypes. A study comparing the general and teacher populations in the United States between 1985 and 2014 found that educators had less negative racial attitudes. However, these differences could be explained by educational attainment. A small minority of teachers still had racial attitudes detrimental to student learning and development. For instance, in 2014, 4% of pre-primary, primary and secondary school teachers believed inequality was mainly due to African Americans having less innate ability to learn, and 31% believed it was mainly due to African Americans lacking motivation or willpower to pull themselves out of poverty

Only just over half of teachers in the USA adapt their teaching to the cultural diversity of students

Teachers with minority backgrounds in the United States, such as African-American or Hispanic teachers, are increasingly under-represented relative to the student population. Lack of diversity can result from intentional hiring and firing decisions. For instance, historical analysis of teacher employment patterns following school integration in the southern United States showed that integration was associated with reduced employment of African-American teachers. The reduction was not a necessary result of the policy but a conscious choice of school administrators, boards of education and federal-level policymakers. A school district transitioning from fully segregated to fully integrated reduced its employment of African-American teachers by 32%

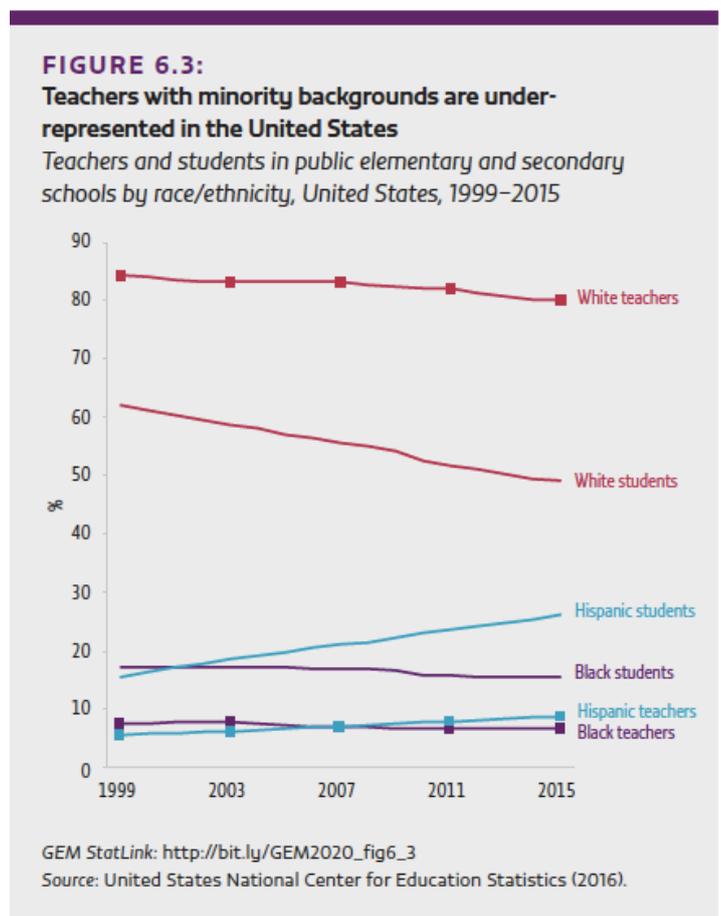
Studies on teachers' assessment of pre-primary students in the United States showed that they judged boys' proficiency to be above girls' when both performed and behaved similarly.

### **Students and parents may need convincing about inclusion**

Among parents of children with disabilities in the United States, positive views of inclusion were more likely among those with higher levels of education.

A study involving 6,000 grade 6 students in the United States showed that the more school diversity increased, the more likely students were to make friends from different ethnic groups, and these friendships led to more positive interethnic attitudes.

At times, parents go so far as to bribe officials to recognize a special need to gain advantage in assessment or support. To increase the chances of university admission, some parents in the United States falsely claimed that their children had learning disabilities, allowing them to take entrance examinations alone, where bribed officials could provide answers



After parents of children with dyslexia in the United States state of Ohio filed a class action against their district because schools were not identifying dyslexia or providing adequate help, schools began training staff to identify and evaluate students with learning disabilities

**There is a chronic lack of quality data on those left behind.**

Comparing the prevalence of disability, difficulties and disadvantage across education systems and over time is problematic, even for clinical diagnoses. For instance, learning disability is the single largest category of special education needs in Germany and the United States, but practically unknown in Japan. In the United States, the cut-off intelligence quotient score for intellectual disability was reduced from 85 to 70 in 1965.

Disproportionality has been thoroughly studied in the United States, where black students are identified with disabilities at higher rates than their peers. Recent studies corroborate the findings, under certain conditions. In Florida, black and Hispanic students are under-represented in physical disabilities and over-represented in intellectual disabilities. They tend to be overidentified with disabilities in schools with few minorities. Every 10 percentage point increase in the share of minority students was associated with a 0.9 point decline in the disability gap with white students. Over-representation of groups in special education is often due to bias in procedures, testing material or people. For instance, students with immigrant backgrounds are often misdiagnosed as having special education needs, partly because literacy tests are not offered in their home language

Socio-economic characteristics can drive special needs categorization status. Interaction of variation in underlying factors with variation in identification has been researched extensively in the United States. For instance, better-off families were more likely to be able to afford and actively seek a diagnosis to ensure that their dyslexic children benefit from services and accommodations. Autism may be on the cusp of a similar development, with mainly richer families demanding access to services that come with the diagnosis, particularly early intervention. The pattern was observed across all racial and ethnic groups, with the largest gap among Asians: 10.7 per 1,000 among the richest 8-year-olds compared with 3.9 among the poorest.

Moreover, US children at a given ability level were disproportionately more likely to be designated as having an intellectual disability if they belonged to racial and ethnic minorities. In some states, minorities could officially be up to five times likelier to be in special education categories without triggering discrimination concerns.

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For more information, b-roll, photos, for interviews, videos or animations please contact Kate Redman [k.redman@unesco.org](mailto:k.redman@unesco.org) 0033 6 71 78 62 34

**Notes to editors**

Visit the Report's [electronic press kit](#) containing Report and multimedia materials. [password: AllmeansAll]

The Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM Report) is developed by an independent team and published by UNESCO. It has the official mandate of monitoring progress in meeting the fourth Sustainable Development Goal on education, SDG 4.

A youth Report is also available, containing case studies, and online campaigns around the 2020 Gem Report's recommendations.

Two regional reports will be released on the theme of inclusion and education later in the year: A Report on Latin America and the Caribbean in October, and a Report on Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia in December