

# **Fire Sale: The Effects of Economic Displacement on the Achievement Gap in DC**

**By: Shaun Moe AFT/WTU Teacher Leader 2015-2016**

*What are the effects, if any, on the achievement gap in DC that can be attributable to the pattern of gentrification and economic displacement in the District of Columbia?*

## **Rationale**

Since 1999, gentrification has changed the face of the neighborhoods throughout the District of Columbia by displacing significant populations of low income, black families. Despite substantial investment in the District of Columbia since then, a pattern of disproportionate achievement has resulted among the students served by public (and public charter) schools in the city when comparing students based on racial divides. This action research was instigated to determine a correlation exists between this economic displacement and the achievement of students. Specifically, my focus on this research is to determine if there is a distinctive corollary between gentrification and the achievement gap of African American school children and their Caucasian counterparts.

## **Literature Review**

Numerous colleges, private and public organizations have begun to produce statistics and related data regarding the evolution of gentrification in Washington, DC. These include the recent publication (2015) by the National Academies Press regarding the achievement gap in DC as it relates to gentrification. I also incorporated the publications by the DC Action for Children which address the idea of a city with three distinct populations, and the corresponding achievement gap. Both of these resources provide a wealth of data from the most recent census and correlate the students from wards identified by the census data. Two sites that are primarily mapping sites were used for pure data and use of visual aides to demonstrate the trends that are occurring in the gentrification process. Raw data was extracted from the city government by using the website [neighborhodinfo.dc.gov](http://neighborhodinfo.dc.gov) which allows the user to extract data specific with respect to each ward and shows a two decade trend for patterns of income, racial composition of the citizens and other indicators that tend to follow poverty (ie. teen births). The final resources that I reference include blog pieces and research based online journals and magazines.

## **Data/Process/Tools**

The data set referenced in this research incorporates data drawn from several sources of published research. I extensively reference local studies, and articles and national trends. This was to ensure the context of the DC phenomenon in the nationwide picture of educational achievement gaps. I looked at the DC-CAS trends (for the years it was given) as the primary indicator of student achievement (as also was the primary indicator as recorded by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education. I compared trends the maps of the wards showed were most affected by gentrification in DC with the gap in achievement both identified in those gentrified neighborhoods but also districtwide (to account for possible relocations of the displaced students).

## **Data Analysis**

From 1995 to 2010, the average home price in the District of Columbia more than doubled from an average of nearly \$200,000 to an average of over \$400,000. A closer examination of these housing trends shows that in Wards 1, 4, 5 and 6 the average house prices have outpaced even the overall dramatic growth city-wide. From 1995-2013, the average Ward 1 house price changed from \$166,000 to \$611,000, Ward 4 from \$197,000 to \$537,000,

Ward 5 from \$146,000 to \$445,000, and Ward 6 from \$161,000 to \$648,000. This dramatic rise in home prices has not been correlated with the average wage of workers; but rather led to a dramatic influx of new residents at the expense of the historic resident families, specifically in those Wards. Despite this upward trend in housing prices, the percentage of residents living in poverty has remained constant (with slight ebbs and flows of a percent or two) at nearly 20%.

A closer look at the census data from those specific Wards tells another story about the gentrification process in the District of Columbia, one that is centered on racial displacement. In Ward 1, the change of racial representation looks like this: from 1990-2010, the total population dipped (1990-2000) by 5,000 residents, but then regained 6,000 residents by 2010. The racial make-up of the Ward changed from 66% black to 43% black over that 20 year period of time while the percentage of Caucasian (non-Hispanic) rose from 30% to 47% of the Ward population. In Ward 4, the total population change was a new loss of nearly 3,000 resident since 1990, by a racial change that show a drop of black residents from 79% to 59%, and a rise in Caucasians from 15% to 20%. Ward 5's data demonstrates a population change of a net loss of 9,000 residents, with a changing racial demographic of 86% to 77% black, and 11% to 15% Caucasian (with a doubling of the Caucasian population since 2000- 7.5% to the 15%). Ward 6 showed the following change as a near zero population change (down 5,000 1990-2000 and up 5,500 2000-2010) but also showed a decline in black residents from 66% to 43% and an increase in Caucasian residents from 30% to 47%. These patterns demonstrate that although the total population didn't significantly shift, the racial demographics of the population did shift in very significant ways during a short time period. A look at the personal income statistics for those same areas over the similar time period indicates that along with the changes in racial demographics came changes in average family incomes. In Ward 1, incomes rose from approximately \$75,000/year in 1999 to \$101,000/year in 2012. Ward 4 similar incomes rise to the tune of \$74,800 to \$87,790. Ward 5 and Ward 6 saw median incomes rise as well \$44,000 to \$57,000 and \$85,500 to \$131,000, respectively from 2000 to 2014.

Having these housing trends and poverty statistics, the next step in my data analysis was to examine the test score trends for students district-wide, and in those certain Wards highlighted above, specifically for their above average jump in home prices. I also endeavored to determine if the new residents of the gentrifying sections of the city have children and if they are attending public (or public charter schools). The overall gains by students on the DC CAS from 2007 until 2014 among black students were 8.5% in Reading and 17% in Math. While those are passable gains, just those gains don't paint the whole picture. The total % of students who scored proficient on those exams was 38.6% in Reading and 41% in Math; or in other words 60% of black students in DC were neither proficient in Reading nor Math. For point of comparison, the proficiency gains for white students over the same time period were 4.6% and 10.4% (Reading and Math respectively), yet the overall picture paints a more unfortunate comparison. In 2014, 91.6% of white students were proficient in Reading, and 92.3% were proficient in Math. This gap of over 50 percentage points in Reading and Math is shocking and troubling. On the newest report of the PARCC assessments from 2015, white students in DC saw 80% of tested students deemed "college and career ready", while only 20% of black students met the requirements for that same designation. While singling out schools in the highlighted Wards and using them as a proof for or against a correlation is a fool's errand, due in a great part to the fact that there are so many factors to cause one particular school to demonstrate a trend over a few years. What we can do is try to identify common characteristics of school score improvement over time. In Wards 1,4,5,6, there are trends of increasing white populations, increasing home prices and increasing median wages while decreasing the population of African Americans. As we see clearly from the cumulative district data, black students perform significantly lower on the standard assessments than white children. Thus, by nature of increasing the number of white students (12% of DCPS students in 2015) and decrease the number of black students (67% of DCPS students, down from 71% 4 years ago) not only will City overall testing average increase (which is a windfall for those forces currently supporting the massive and continued gentrification), but will also create a more veiled picture of the achievement gap. While, over the last 10 years the achievement gap (according to the DC CAS) had gotten a little smaller, a 50% discrepancy still remains, and if we are to believe the newest PARCC data, the gap has actually become larger. There is another trend that is

interesting to note, since 2004, the number of black students attending charter schools in DC has more than doubled while the number of black students attending DCPS has shrunk by nearly 7,000. This means that the achievement gap has remained nearly the same or may have minimally improved during the growth of the PCS marketplace in DC and not substantially abated. This also may indicate that there is more to test scores than just where students attend school, but rather environmental ones that may play a role in the development of the students.

### **Recommendations**

While it appears that gentrification tends to impact the achievement gap's trend towards widening, I believe that there is a correlation directly related to the economic displacement of low income people. It would appear from the data that, although not intentional, the investment in and gentrification of Wards across DC has led to the growth in number of higher income, mostly Caucasian, families moving into the city (which tend to have students that produce higher academic performance metrics) has led to a displacement of students; either out of the city entirely or into a lower income area (Wards 7 or 8). This replacing of students who were lower income and black with middle income and white has further expanded the achievement gap and, I believe, will fuel greater disparity. The lowest performing African American students in the district reside in Wards 7 and 8, and as Wards 1,4,5, and 6 continue to change in their socio-economic and racial makeup, there will be a further widening of the achievement gap unless real investment is made in the lives of students in the lowest performing Wards.

Economic displacement leads to a higher stress environment for families of students due to cost of housing, availability (and reliability). It also leads to less accessibility of public transportation, less accessibility to grocery stores and other living necessities, less accessibility to physical and mental health care, and higher crime rates. These are among a myriad of other environmental stressors that Maslow explained could affect the educational gains of students living in those circumstances. When families are displaced due to the economic pressures added by the forces of gentrification (including rent/mortgage price explosions), students are moved to new schools (often far away from their previous schools) which could have psychological effects on students. With this understanding of one of the reasons how gentrification can affect the learning potential of students, thus broadening the achievement gap, it would be my recommendation that governments invest in ensuring families displaced by gentrifying forces are provided for. This would include to: provide wrap around services, ensure that access to public transit is equitable, provide continuing education classes/job training opportunities for parents, invest in public revitalization of neighborhoods and schools instead of selling off city assets and community centers to private entities seeking to profit personally at the expense of the native residents.

### **Bibliography**

Nevins, Sean. "Gentrification Targets DC's Public Schools, Extracts Resources From The Poor". Mint Press News, 22 June 2015. Web.< <http://www.mintpressnews.com/gentrification-targets-dcs-public-schools-extracts-resources-from-the-poor/206783/>>

Neighborhood Info DC. Project of the Urban Institute. Revised 1 April 2015. Web.  
< [www.neighborhoodinfodc.org](http://www.neighborhoodinfodc.org)>

Goldchan, Michelle. "Mapping Gentrification in Washington, DC". Curbed DC, 14 September 2015. Web.  
<<http://dc.curbed.com/2015/9/14/9921720/gentrification-dc-black-map>>

Rabinowicz, Kate. "DC Gentrification by the Numbers". Data Lens DC. 14 September 2015. Web.

<http://www.dataensdc.com/gentrification-by-numbers.html>

"An Evaluation of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia: Reform in a Changing Landscape". The National Academies Press. (2015) Web.

"A Tale of Three Cities: What the Census Says About the District and How We Must Respond". DC Action for Children. May 2011. Web. < [https://www.dcactionforchildren.org/sites/default/files/CensusBrief4-27-11%20FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://www.dcactionforchildren.org/sites/default/files/CensusBrief4-27-11%20FINAL_0.pdf)

Ladner, Matthew. "Gentrification is the primary driver of District of Columbia Academic Gains". Jay P. Green's blog. 9 February 2016. Web. <<https://jaypgreene.com/2016/02/09/gentrification-is-the-primary-driver-of-district-of-columbia-academic-gains/>>

"DC's Achievement Gap: Why Place Matters". DC Action for Children. February 2012. Web. <<https://www.dcactionforchildren.org/sites/default/files/AchievementGap.pdf>>