The Political Foundations of the Black-White Education Achievement Gap* 

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Abstract

More than fifty years after *Brown v. Board*, African American students continue to trail their white peers on a variety of important educational indicators. In this article, we investigate the political foundations of the racial “achievement gap” in American education. Using variation in high school graduation rates across the states, we first assess whether state policymakers are attentive to the educational needs of struggling African American students. We find evidence that state policymaking attention to teacher quality – an issue education research shows is essential to improving schooling outcomes for racial minority students – is highly responsive to low graduation rates among white students, but bears no relationship to low graduation rates among African American students. We then probe a possible mechanism behind this unequal responsiveness by examining the factors that motivate white public opinion about education reform and find racial influences there as well. Taken together, we uncover evidence that the persisting achievement gap between white and African American students has distinctively political foundations.
Public education occupies a unique place in the hierarchy of American social policymaking. Beyond comprising the nation’s largest social welfare program devoted to promoting equal opportunity through social mobility, surveys consistently show that public education is one of the few American social programs that commands broad support (Hochschild, 2004). However, pitted against the democratic ideal of universal public schooling operating as American society’s “great equalizer” is a large body of evidence documenting significant disparities in the high school graduation rates and standardized test scores of African American and white students (Coleman, 1966; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Neal, 2006; Rivkin, 1995; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). These persisting differences in educational outcomes between African American students and their white peers are important because they translate directly into social inequalities later in life including future earnings, employment status, and incarceration rates (Fryer, 2010; Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Lochner & Moretti, 2004).

The education achievement gap between whites and African Americans likely has consequences for political equality as well. American public education has long been responsible for training future citizens (Campbell, 2006; Gutmann, 1999) and, whatever the precise mechanism(s) involved, level of educational attainment stands apart as the most robust predictor for whether an individual actively participates in politics (Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Sondheimer & Green, 2010; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; but see Kam & Palmer, 2008, 2011). In light of the special role public education plays in equipping citizens with the tools and motivation necessary to participate in American democracy, educational inequalities between white and African American students may serve to perpetuate and even exacerbate
existing inequalities in rates of political participation for future generations (Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 2003).

In response to the persisting education achievement gap, policy entrepreneurs have focused recent education reform efforts around improving the quality and effectiveness of America’s teaching workforce, with particular emphasis on identifying policies that increase the supply of effective teachers in underserved communities (Berry, 1988; Goldhaber & Hannaway, 2009). This increased attention to reforming the policies that govern the American teaching profession is driven, in part, by the fact that in the forty years since James Coleman (1966) penned his widely influential *Equality of Educational Opportunity* report, the most consistent finding in education research is that teacher quality/effectiveness stands as the most significant school level variable influencing student achievement (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2011; Goldhaber, 2002; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Sanders & Rivers, 1996).

Although research shows that sustained access to effective teachers can help narrow the achievement gap (Hanushek and Rivkin, 2004), racial minority students are far less likely to be assigned to and taught by highly effective teachers (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005; Feng, 2010; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Peske & Haycock, 2006; Scafidi, Sjoquist, & Stinebrickner, 2008). Equally noteworthy is the fact that disparities in who has access to effective teachers is partly a function of politics – namely, the policy choices states and school districts use to govern the teaching profession (Corcoran & Evans, 2008; Grissom, Loeb, & Nakashima, 2012; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004). Since state policymakers maintain significant discretion over many teacher workforce policies (most notably educator pay and evaluation systems) that influence students’ access to highly effective teachers (Cohen & Walsh, 2010; Manna & Tydgat, 2008; Wong, 2008), the persisting achievement gap between African
American and white students provokes important questions about political representation and racial inequality. Yet, apart from a few notable exceptions (Meier & England, 1984; Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989), existing research on education policymaking tends to overlook these fundamental questions about fairness and political equality.

To better understand the linkage between political inequality and educational opportunity in the United States, we begin by developing a set of theoretical expectations to explain why so few states adopt the policy reforms that education research suggests could help narrow the disparity in educational outcomes between white and African American students. Specifically, we hypothesize that racial inequality in state education policymaking can be explained, in part, by considering the “demand” for education reform among the public. To determine the viability of this explanation for the persistence of the education achievement gap between white and African American students, we first examine if state policymakers are equally responsive to the demonstrated educational needs of white and African American students when they enact education policy reforms aimed at improving teacher quality.

We find that teacher quality reform policymaking is responsive to poor education outcomes among white students but not African American students. We then investigate one possible mechanism behind this relationship by examining the factors that motivate white public opinion about (and demand for) education reform and find distinctively racial influences there as well. Specifically, we show that white opinions in support of education reforms are significantly tied to the performance of white but not African American students. White citizens are also less likely to identify the existence of a racial achievement gap in American education and less likely to prioritize it as a policy concern compared to African American citizens. In sum, we uncover
evidence that educational inequalities between African American and white students are sustained, in part, by systematic political inequalities.

**The Politics of the Education Achievement Gap**

We investigate the existence of a racial undercurrent in the politics of education policymaking. Historically, elementary and secondary education policymaking, particularly at the sub-national level, has been embedded within a larger struggle over racial and ethnic politics (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999; Hochschild & Shen, forthcoming; Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989). From southern governors who wed their political fortune to maintaining segregated schools to more contemporary controversies over busing and affirmative action, elementary and secondary education policymaking has been created and recreated within the contours of a racially polarized society.

Even in the aftermath of government mandated desegregation of public education, scholars uncovered systematic patterns of “second-generation discrimination” in which public schools suspend racial minorities and track them out of college preparatory classes at rates much higher than whites (Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989). Political scientists have offered additional evidence of a link between these sorts of exclusionary school practices and more general biases in the American political system. For example, the use of “at-large” electoral systems by many school districts across the U.S. serves to minimize descriptive representation on school boards, which in turn is associated with racial minority students being subjected to heightened levels of second-generation discrimination (Leal, Martinez-Ebers, & Meier, 2004; Meier & England, 1984, 1986; Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989).
After a period of dramatic improvement in African American student outcomes relative to whites (whether measured by student performance on the National Assessment of Education Progress or by attainment rates of high school and postsecondary degrees), since the early 1990s the size of the achievement gap between African American and white students has stagnated or even slightly increased (Neal, 2006; Thernstrom & Thernstorm, 2003). Although research in psychology demonstrates that there exist no quantifiable cognitive differences between white and African American infants (Fryer & Levitt, 2006), only two years into schooling African American children already significantly trail their white peers on age appropriate academic measures (Fryer, 2010; Fryer & Levitt, 2004). Moreover, on every subject at every grade level, there are large achievement gaps between African Americans and whites that continue to grow as children progress through school – gaps that remain large and statistically significant even after controlling for socioeconomic and family background factors (Jencks & Phillips, 1998).

Partly on the basis of these stubborn achievement gaps, the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act took the unprecedented step of requiring states to document and publicly report student test score data by racial and ethnic subgroups. In fact, the law went so far as to list among its chief goals holding states accountable for “closing the achievement gap between high and low performing children, especially the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students.” More recently, President Obama’s signature education policy initiative – the “Race to the Top” (RTTT) competitive grant program – made decreasing achievement gaps between racial subgroups a key component of its scoring rubric for awarding federal money to states willing to make significant reforms, particularly reforms directed toward increasing racial minority students’ access to highly effective teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).
To date, the majority of scholarly research examining public policy and the education achievement gap has focused on identifying the effects, rather than causes, of state education policies (Harris & Herrington, 2006; Lee, 2002). We take a different approach by reversing the causal arrow and examining whether state education policymaking (i.e. the propensity of policymakers to undertake education reforms) can be explained by differential responsiveness to educational outcomes among white and African American students within a state and by investigating whether white public opinion about education reform is the mechanism linking educational outcomes to policymaking.

Theoretical Expectations

What aspects of student performance and school quality, if any, stimulate the demand necessary for state policymakers to enact politically controversial education policy reforms? Given widespread variation in student and school outcomes both within and across states as well as gaps between subgroups of states’ student populations, elected officials have multiple constituent concerns competing for their limited attention. Beyond the fact that these multiple competing policy problems limit the attention of politicians (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005), education reformers must also face off with the well-known status quo bias in the American political system – a bias that makes blocking newly proposed measures relatively easy for organized interests who favor the status quo (Moe, 2006). In the specific domain of state education policymaking, organized teacher union interest groups have been particularly effective in opposing policy proposals that would differentiate teacher pay and link tenure and evaluation decisions to student learning outcomes (Hartney & Flavin, 2011; Moe, 2011). In short, policy entrepreneurs who wish to convince elected officials to enact policy reforms that would link
teacher pay and evaluations to student outcomes face a politically contentious environment in which organized interests can be expected to push back with significant zeal. Consequently, we hypothesize that these teacher reform proposals will only gain traction when state policymakers sense an acute demand among a significant majority of the public for a departure from the status quo.

We further theorize that demand for education reform among the public is largely shaped by the public’s perception of the quality and overall health of the public school system in their state and/or local community. When citizens perceive that student performance is lagging and that the quality of their community schools are poor, only then are they likely to agitate enough to overcome policymakers’ hesitations to pursue controversial education reform policies. This raises an interesting question: Under what circumstances will the public’s unease over the quality of their schools reach a breaking point? More specifically, will academic deficiencies among African American students register in the public’s consciousness enough to catalyze citizen demand for education reform? Our expectation is that the vast majority of the public will rarely become alarmed over the state of K-12 education, and almost never alarmed over the education outcomes of African American students, for several reasons.

First, the organization of public education in the U.S. is designed in such a way that a broad constituency for school reform is unlikely to materialize (Warren, 2011). Specifically, the traditional financing system in American K-12 education is heavily reliant on the property tax, which ensures that tastes and preferences for public school spending and school performance remains commensurate with the majority of homeowners in a given school district (Fischel, 2001, 2009; Tiebout, 1956). The implications of this system for the demand side of education reform are obvious – middle and upper income Americans can avoid feeling the pain of poorly
performing urban school systems by retreating to suburban enclaves where property values are high and the presence of a large contingent of poorly performing racial minority students is nonexistent. Therefore, the likelihood that a large majority of white citizens will clamor for education reforms to address the needs of struggling racial minority students is slim (Kozol, 1991; Roza, 2010; Warren, 2011).

Second, the performance of African American students is unlikely to generate demand for school reform among a majority of the white public because some teacher reform proposals are likely understood by white citizens as a zero-sum game in which their own school districts have nothing to gain and everything to lose. For example, proposals to pay teachers more to teach in low-performing urban schools are easily framed as redistributive in nature since they effectively use government subsidies to draw high quality teachers out of suburban schools and provide incentives for them to instead work in urban schools. In short, the current status quo approach to teacher compensation (a “single salary” schedule that rewards experience and credentials) biases teacher labor markets in favor of advantaged schools and against low-performing urban ones where turnover is higher on account of more challenging working conditions (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004). Consequently, proposals to differentiate teacher pay (e.g., additional compensation for working in “hard-to-staff” schools) are unlikely to solicit widespread support from white suburban parents who may view their children as the primary losers as a result of these policy changes.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, a growing literature reveals that African Americans generally exert less political influence than whites in terms of having their opinions reflected in elected officials’ in-office behavior and policy decisions (Griffin & Flavin, 2007; Griffin & Newman, 2008; Hajnal, 2010). At election time, state legislators are faced with the often
competing demands of white and African American constituents, especially on questions relating to education policy. To maximize voter support, we can expect state legislators to prioritize the needs and opinions of white constituents except in instances where African Americans make up a majority. While African Americans do make up a majority in many state legislative districts across the states, African Americans do not constitute a majority (or even a plurality) in any single state. As a result, we expect the needs and opinions of white constituents to win out over the needs and opinions of African American constituents when the two come into conflict in the state education policymaking process.

In sum, we have little theoretical reason to expect that either white parents or the state legislators who represent them will demand significant education reforms in the face of poor performance among racial minority students. However, such demand may materialize when white students are faring poorly. In other words, policymakers might be differentially responsive to the educational needs of white versus African American students. To empirically evaluate this claim, we first turn to state level data on student educational outcomes and education reform policymaking.

**Black-White Student Educational Outcomes and Teacher Quality Policy Reforms**

We begin by examining whether state education reform policymaking responds differentially to the education outcomes of white and African American students. For both substantive and methodological reasons, we focus on education policy reforms aimed at increasing students’ access to highly effective teachers. Since this study is focused on state efforts to narrow gaps in student learning between white and African American students, focusing on teacher policy reform is especially appropriate given the educational research
literature’s link between teacher quality and student outcomes. Moreover, unlike other salient state level education reforms (e.g., school finance reform, vouchers, or charter schools), efforts to overhaul teacher pay and evaluation policies are among the most recent temporally, which is important from a methodological standpoint given our desire to understand how student outcomes influence policymaking (rather than how changes in policy influence students’ educational outcomes). In other words, because we assess teacher reform policies that were generally debated and enacted after our measures of student performance, we can have greater confidence that policymaking is responding to deficiencies in student outcomes rather than the other way around.

To measure educational outcomes for white and African American student separately by subgroup, we use each state’s high school graduation rate for the class of 2005 disaggregated by race. Our graduation rate measure is taken from the U.S. Department of Education’s Averaged Freshman Graduation Rates for Public School Students (AFGR). In addition to our main explanatory variable of interest – white and African American education outcomes as measured by high school graduation rates – we consider and control for alternative factors that may influence a state’s propensity to pursue teacher policy reforms. Specifically, we include a measure of the general ideological liberalism of state government (Berry, Ringquist, Fording, & Hanson, 1998) with the expectation that more liberal states will be less likely to enact reforms given the general propensity of political liberals to rely on teacher union interest groups for electoral support. We include a (logged) measure of a state’s public school student population and a measure of the percentage of education financing that comes from the state (relative to local or the federal government) with the expectation that larger states and states that provide a greater percentage of school dollars will be more empowered and thus more likely to enact state-
level education reforms (Shen & Wong, 2006). We also include a measure of teacher union political campaign contributions and the strength of a state’s teacher collective bargaining law with the expectation that states with politically and organizationally strong teacher unions will be less likely to enact reforms (Hartney & Flavin, 2011). Finally, we include a measure from Education Week’s annual Quality Counts report grading states on their efforts to improve teacher quality for the year 2005 as a way to control for a state’s past policy climate on teacher reform issues (Editorial Projects in Education, 2005). By including this control variable, we are more confident that our dependent variable in the present is not simply a function of policy reforms made previously or a function of policymakers’ efforts to address past deficiencies in the overall qualifications of the state’s teaching workforce. Because the dependent variable is a count (0-12) of policies enacted, we use a negative binomial regression estimator.

Table 1 reports the results of regressing the count of teacher reform policies on white and African American high school graduation rates in 2005 and the set of control variables explained above. As expected, states with larger student enrollments are more likely to enact teacher quality reforms while states with more politically active teacher unions are less likely to enact these types of reforms. Moving to our primary independent variables of interest, the coefficient for white high school graduation rate is negative and statistically different from zero, indicating that across the states, as white graduation rates decline states are more likely to enact reforms aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of their teaching workforce. Substantively, moving from a state at the ninetieth percentile for white student graduation rate to a state at the tenth percentile predicts an additional two policy reforms enacted on the twelve policy scale. In contrast, the coefficient for African American graduation rate is not statistically different from
zero, providing evidence that state policymaking appears unrelated to the performance of African American students. These results suggest that, across the states, policymakers are unequally responsive to the demonstrated educational needs of white and African American students.

**What Motivates White Citizens’ Opinions on Education?**

One possible mechanism that helps explain the unequal policy responsiveness documented above is that, consistent with the findings of several previous studies (Griffin & Flavin, 2007; Griffin & Newman, 2008; Hajnal, 2010), policymakers are more likely to respond to the political preferences of white citizens compared to African Americans. To investigate whether this mechanism is at play in education policymaking, we next examine whether white citizens’ opinions on education are sensitive to student outcomes using two sets of nationally representative public opinion data. First, we use the 2004 and 2008 waves of the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) to investigate whether student performance indicators predict if white respondents identify “education” when asked: “In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing our country today?” Specifically, we model responses to the most important problem item (coded as “1” if a respondent identifies education as the most important problem and “0” if he/she identifies anything else as most important such as “crime,” “unemployment,” “the environment,” etc.) as a function of the high school graduation rate for whites and African Americans in their state of residence the year before the survey (2003 or 2007), their state’s unemployment rate the year before the survey, whether there are children under the age of eighteen (i.e. “school-aged”) in a respondent’s household, and the respondent’s gender, age, income, level of education, partisanship (Democrat coded higher), political ideology (liberal coded higher), and an indicator for year of survey. If student outcomes have an effect on
citizen opinion about the importance of education issues, the coefficient for both graduation rates
will be negative such that, across the state-years, as graduation rates get lower, respondents will
be more likely to identify education as the most important problem. We also expect that the
coefficient for state unemployment rate will be negative such that as a state’s unemployment rate
goes up, respondents will be more likely to focus on jobs and the economy and less likely to
identify education as the most important problem.20

[Table 2 about here]

We report the results of this probit estimation in Column 1 of Table 2 and find that white
citizens’ propensity to identify education as the most important problem increases as white
graduation rates decline but bears no statistical relationship with graduation rates for African
American students. Combining the results from Table 1 and 2, the graduation rates (i.e. for
whites but not for African Americans) that predict policy change similarly predict white public
opinion, making white opinion a likely link between educational outcomes and subsequent
policies. Substantively, we find that moving from one standard deviation above the mean for
white graduation rate to one standard deviation below the mean across the state-years leads to
nearly a one percentage point increase in the probability of identifying education as the most
important problem which, by comparison, is larger than the difference between a respondent
living in a household without vs. with school-aged children. Looking at the other coefficients in
the model, we also find that women, Democrats, and ideological liberals are more likely to
identify education as the nation’s most important problem.

Second, we use data from a 1996 survey on education reform carried out by Moe (2001)21
to investigate if student achievement indicators predict white responses to the question: “Which
of the following best describes how you feel about the schools in your state as a whole?” The
response categories are: (1) They are doing well, (2) They need minor changes, or (3) They need major changes. This question nicely taps citizen demand for school reforms. We model white citizens’ responses to this survey question as a function of white and African American graduation rates in the respondent’s state for 1996 and the same set of control variables used in the analysis of the NAES data above. Similar to above, if student achievement has its expected effect on public opinion, the coefficient for both graduation rates will be negative such that, across the states, as graduation rates get lower, respondents will be more likely to identify education as needing major changes.

The results of this ordered probit estimation are reported in Column 2 of Table 2. We again find that white citizens are more concerned about education (i.e. they are more likely to report that changes are needed to schools) as white students’ graduation rates decline. Substantively, moving from one standard deviation above the mean for white graduation rate to one standard deviation below the mean across the states leads to an eleven percentage point increase in the probability of a respondent favoring “major changes” for their state’s public education system. In contrast, no such relationship exists for African American graduation rates. Looking at the other coefficients, females, more affluent respondents, and political conservatives are more likely to express demand for changes in schools. More importantly, however, is the fact the NAES and this analysis from Moe’s (2001) survey data nearly a decade earlier point to the same conclusion: white respondents sound the alarm about school quality when white students are performing poorly, but not when African American students are performing poorly.

One concern with examining the relationship between student achievement and public opinion using state-level measures of student educational outcomes is that citizens are better
positioned to pay close attention to and be knowledgeable about the performance of students and the quality of schools in their local community (Henderson, Chingos, & West, 2010). Schools are, after all, traditionally a local matter in the U.S. (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005). Therefore, we next consider how white and African American student achievement at the local school district level influences how white citizens evaluate the quality of their local schools.

To better understand these micro-foundations of white public opinion about education reform policymaking, we draw on a unique set of surveys commissioned by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) at the University of Indiana-Bloomington. CEEP conducted a total of six “Public Opinion Surveys on Indiana Education” between 2003 and 2008 querying Indiana residents’ perceptions about the quality of their local public schools. Fortunately, many of the items were asked identically throughout all six waves enabling us to pool the data and generate a reasonably large sample of respondents located in 277 of Indiana’s 295 school corporations (districts).

In order to link citizens to their actual school district of residence, we matched respondents’ home telephone numbers to their residential addresses and by extension their school district. Drawing on administrative data from the Indiana Department of Education we then gathered information on the percentage of white and African American students who scored proficient in third, sixth, eighth, and tenth grade on the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP) Assessment in mathematics and reading for each school district and linked these outcome measures to each one of our respondents based on their school district of residence. It is important to note that these data were matched to respondents by school district and year so that, for example, the percentage of students proficient on ISTEP Math in the Indianapolis Public School District (IPS) during 2006 was linked only to respondents
in the sample who lived within IPS and were contacted as part of the 2006 survey wave. Thus, unique data were obtained for each district and for each year for all variables to ensure use of the most accurate contextual measures of respondents’ districts.

We model respondents’ evaluations of their community schools as a function of white and African American student achievement (measured as the average math and reading ISTEP passage rates for third, sixth, eighth, and tenth grades) in the respondent’s school district of residence, whether a respondent is retired or not, whether a respondent reported voting in the most recent election, whether a respondent has school-aged children living at home, a respondent’s age, level of education, income, and gender, the percentage of students in the respondent’s school corporation who are African American, and dummy variables for the year of the survey (leaving one as a reference category). Because we theorize that state policymakers responsible for enacting education reform policies tend to be responsive to white but not African American opinion (Griffin & Flavin, 2007, Griffin & Newman, 2008; Hajnal, 2010), we again limit our analysis to whites only. Doing so allows us to examine what factors motivate the opinions of the racial group that state policymakers are most attentive and responsive to.

[Table 3 about here]

In Column 1 of Table 3 we report the results of regressing evaluations of local community schools on the set of covariates explained above. The dependent variable is coded such that a higher number (1-4) indicates greater approval.29 We find that white citizens’ evaluations of their community school are strongly linked to white student performance in their school district of residence such that higher white student performance predicts more positive evaluations. In contrast, a white citizen’s evaluation of the local public schools is not linked to African American student performance.30 Put another way, white Indianans rate the quality of
their schools in relation to how well or poorly white students are performing, but pay comparatively little attention to the performance of African American students.

To check if white citizens incorporate African American student achievement into their evaluations of community schools as the percentage of African American students grows, we create an interaction term between African American test scores and the percentage of school corporation residents who are African American and include it as a covariate in the same model specification. The interaction term is not statistically different from zero (see Column 2 and Table 3), indicating that a greater percentage of African American students in a school corporation does not make white citizens more likely to link African American student achievement with evaluations of community schools. Consistent with the analysis of national survey data reported earlier in this section, the achievement of African American students seems to have little influence on the education opinions of white citizens which, in turn, influence educational policymaking decisions.

**Do Whites and African Americans Have Different Opinions about the Achievement Gap?**

Given the results uncovered in the previous section, what explains the fact that white but not African American student performance influences white citizens’ opinions about education? Are white citizens unaware of a racial achievement gap? Do they simply not view it as a major policy concern? We probe these questions using data from Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup’s Annual Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools. Controlling for an array of demographic characteristics (partisanship, level of education, income, gender, age, and whether a respondent has school-aged children or not), we examine whether whites have different opinions on educational inequality (and its possible remedies) compared to African Americans. In Table
4, we report the results of five estimations that investigate differences in responses between whites and African Americans to the following survey items:

1. Is the academic achievement of white students, nationally, higher (3), lower (1) or about the same (2) as that of black and other minority students?

2. In your opinion, do black children and other minority children in your community have the same educational opportunities as white children? (1=Yes, 0=No)

3. In your opinion, how important do you think it is to close the academic achievement gap between white students and black and Hispanic students – very important (4), somewhat important (3), not too important (2), or not important at all (1)?

4. In your opinion, is the achievement gap between white students and black and Hispanic students mostly related to the quality of schooling received, or mostly related to other factors? (Schools=1, Other factors=0)

5. In your opinion, is it the responsibility of the government to close the achievement gap between white students and black and Hispanic students, or not? (1=Yes, 0=No)

The first two survey items (Columns 1 and 2) reveal that whites are significantly less likely to identify the existence of a racial achievement gap or perceive inequality in educational opportunity within the public school system. Controlling for all other demographic variables, white respondents are twenty-three percentage points less likely than African Americans to think that, nationally, white student achievement exceeds African American student achievement. White respondents are also forty percentage points more likely than African Americans to think racial minorities have the same educational opportunities as whites.

[Table 4 about here]
The final three columns of Table 4 reveal that, compared to African Americans, whites also view the education achievement gap as less of a policy concern. White respondents are twelve percentage points less likely than African Americans to think that the achievement gap is “very important” and twenty-one percentage points more likely than African Americans to report that the racial achievement gap in student learning is due to other factors outside of schools. Moreover, whites are fourteen percentage points less likely than African Americans to think that the government has a responsibility to close the education achievement gap. Taken together, these results indicate that, compared to African Americans, white citizens are less likely to identify that the education achievement gap exists, less likely to think it an urgent or fixable problem, and less likely to think a government response or solution is needed. Consistent with the analyses reported throughout the paper, there seem to be distinctively racial considerations that drive white public opinion about educational opportunity in the U.S.

Conclusion

As Hochschild (2004, 225) argues, schools occupy a “unique place … in American political and social culture.” Education is one of the few policy areas where Americans have long maintained a consensus in favor of universal public access and provision. As a result, schools consume considerable portions of local, state, and even federal budgets, and are among the most significant sources of public employment. Perhaps most importantly, public schools provide not only crucial training in the skills and knowledge required for work and life, but also for effective future citizenship (Campbell, 2006; Gutmann, 1999). Because education plays such a crucial role in the cultivation of civic and political engagement (and in shrinking the gap in
rates of political participation between whites and African Americans), the results we uncover in this paper are especially concerning from a political equality standpoint.

Building on previous research that has uncovered significant representational inequalities along racial lines (Griffin & Flavin, 2007; Griffin & Newman, 2008; Hajnal, 2010), we hypothesize that educational inequalities between African American and white students are sustained, in part, by systematic political inequalities. We first show that across the states, teacher reform policymaking is responsive to poor educational outcomes among white students but not African American students. We then probe a possible mechanism behind this relationship by examining the factors that lead white citizens to advocate for greater education reform and find distinctively racial influences there as well. That is, for white citizens, education issues become salient and school reform a major policy concern when white students perform poorly; however, such concerns are divorced from the success or failure of African American students. Moreover, white citizens are less likely to identify the existence of a racial achievement gap and less likely to think educational opportunities are unequal. This may explain why, even after controlling for an array of other factors, whites are far less likely to prioritize the achievement gap as a policy concern or believe that government has a responsibility to help narrow the gap. Whether analyzed at the policymaking level or the level of individual citizens’ political attitudes, white students receive far more attention and subsequent response compared to African American students. Instead of promoting equality of opportunity, America’s system of K-12 education – with its heavy reliance on state and local control – may instead serve to further exacerbate existing political inequalities between whites and African Americans.
Importantly, our analysis is confined to examining white citizens’ demand for school reform and state policymakers’ responsiveness without considering how the federal government may strive to attenuate some of these inequalities. Although the story we uncover focuses on the constraints of federalism – namely that the American tradition of ceding education policymaking authority to sub-national governments tends to diminish the prospects of a broad constituency for school reform (Warren, 2011) – the federal government has, in recent years, played an increasingly important role in tackling issues of educational inequality (Manna, 2006). As Peterson’s (1981) work on federalism argues, redistributive policymaking will typically remain the domain of national, rather than sub-national, governments. Therefore, it is not surprising that the most recent and widespread efforts to inject attention to educational inequality into K-12 school reform have come from policymakers in Washington, D.C. Indeed, President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act and President Obama’s Race to the Top initiative have leveraged variants of fiscal federalism as a strategy to compel (in the former case) or entice (in the latter) states to enact a variety of reform policies aimed at reducing the education achievement gap – reforms which we have shown have little promise of receiving attention on the sole basis of a state’s internal political environment. Although we leave it to other scholars to evaluate whether these two federal education policies have worked as policymakers’ intended, we simply note that they further reflect the unique “tangled web” (Epstein, 2004) of American education governance that can limit policy attention to struggling students who need it most.
References


Table 1: Teacher Quality Policy Reforms Linked to White But Not African American Student Graduation Rates

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Student Graduation Rate</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>[0.012]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Government Liberalism</td>
<td>-0.005</td>
<td>[0.005]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of Student Population (logged)</td>
<td>0.298 **</td>
<td>[0.131]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Funding from State</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>[0.009]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Union Campaign Contributions</td>
<td>-0.393 ***</td>
<td>[0.152]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Collective Bargaining Laws</td>
<td>-0.157</td>
<td>[0.152]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Teacher Quality Reforms</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>[0.013]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.670</td>
<td>[2.160]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dependent variable: Count (0-12) of state teacher quality policy reforms in 2009. Cell entries are negative binomial regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets. * denotes p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01 using a two-tailed test.
Table 2: White Respondents Identify Education as the Most Important Problem/Schools in Need of Major Change in Response to White But Not African American Graduation Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Education Most Important Problem (0-1)</th>
<th>Schools in Need of Change (1-3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Graduation Rate in State</td>
<td>-0.005*</td>
<td>-0.021*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.002]</td>
<td>[0.011]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Graduation Rate in State</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.002]</td>
<td>[0.006]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate in State</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
<td>0.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.019]</td>
<td>[0.071]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.302 ***</td>
<td>0.274 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.022]</td>
<td>[0.067]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.010 ***</td>
<td>0.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.001]</td>
<td>[0.016]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.064 ***</td>
<td>0.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.006]</td>
<td>[0.026]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>0.052 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.007]</td>
<td>[0.022]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in Household (Yes=1, No=0)</td>
<td>0.104 ***</td>
<td>-0.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.027]</td>
<td>[0.096]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship (Democrat coded higher)</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>-0.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.007]</td>
<td>[0.027]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Ideology (liberal coded higher)</td>
<td>0.036 ***</td>
<td>-0.078 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.012]</td>
<td>[0.042]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.458 ***</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.218]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point #1</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-1.445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[1.092]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point #2</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-0.285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[1.105]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>62,490</td>
<td>727</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dependent variable listed above each column.
Cell entries are probit/ordered probit coefficients with standard errors clustered by state-year/state in brackets.
Dummy variable for survey wave included in Column 1 but not reported.
* denotes p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01 using a two-tailed test.
Table 3: White Citizens’ Evaluations of Their Community Schools Linked to White But Not African American Student Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Student Test Scores</td>
<td>0.060***</td>
<td>0.059***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.016]</td>
<td>[0.017]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Student Test Scores</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.003]</td>
<td>[0.005]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Student Test Scores x</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% African American in School Corporation</td>
<td></td>
<td>[0.018]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>-0.037</td>
<td>-0.037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.139]</td>
<td>[0.138]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voter</td>
<td>-0.141</td>
<td>-0.142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.108]</td>
<td>[0.108]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in Household</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>-0.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.086]</td>
<td>[0.087]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.047</td>
<td>-0.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.040]</td>
<td>[0.040]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.036</td>
<td>0.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.042]</td>
<td>[0.042]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>0.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.040]</td>
<td>[0.040]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>0.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.091]</td>
<td>[0.091]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% African American in School Corporation</td>
<td>-0.964***</td>
<td>-1.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.371]</td>
<td>[1.846]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point #1</td>
<td>2.505***</td>
<td>2.451**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.954]</td>
<td>[1.163]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point #2</td>
<td>3.566***</td>
<td>3.512***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.945]</td>
<td>[1.163]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point #3</td>
<td>5.003***</td>
<td>4.949***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.962]</td>
<td>[1.175]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo $R^2$</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>701</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dependent variable: Evaluation of community schools (1-4, more favorable evaluation coded higher). Cell entries are ordered probit coefficients with standard errors clustered by school corporation in brackets. Dummy variables for year of survey included in both models but not reported. * denotes p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01 using a two-tailed test.
### Table 4: Whites and African Americans Have Different Opinions About the Existence and Importance of the Education Achievement Gap

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White student achievement higher than African American student achievement?</td>
<td>Equal opportunity for African American students?</td>
<td>Achievement gap important?</td>
<td>Achievement gap caused by schools?</td>
<td>Government responsible for closing achievement gap?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>0.651***</td>
<td>-1.211***</td>
<td>0.386**</td>
<td>0.667***</td>
<td>0.362**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.173]</td>
<td>[0.166]</td>
<td>[0.176]</td>
<td>[0.162]</td>
<td>[0.163]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>0.135</td>
<td>0.402***</td>
<td>-0.103</td>
<td>-0.120</td>
<td>-0.191*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.103]</td>
<td>[0.141]</td>
<td>[0.104]</td>
<td>[0.128]</td>
<td>[0.107]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>0.192*</td>
<td>-0.238*</td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>0.126</td>
<td>0.225*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.106]</td>
<td>[0.125]</td>
<td>[0.109]</td>
<td>[0.124]</td>
<td>[0.109]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.112***</td>
<td>-0.045</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
<td>-0.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.023]</td>
<td>[0.029]</td>
<td>[0.024]</td>
<td>[0.027]</td>
<td>[0.024]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.154***</td>
<td>-0.094</td>
<td>0.174***</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
<td>0.126*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.049]</td>
<td>[0.063]</td>
<td>[0.051]</td>
<td>[0.060]</td>
<td>[0.052]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td>0.301***</td>
<td>-0.038</td>
<td>0.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.088]</td>
<td>[0.111]</td>
<td>[0.088]</td>
<td>[0.105]</td>
<td>[0.090]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>-0.091</td>
<td>-0.162***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.052]</td>
<td>[0.067]</td>
<td>[0.054]</td>
<td>[0.063]</td>
<td>[0.055]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children (0=No, 1=Yes)</td>
<td>-0.150</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>-0.099</td>
<td>-0.081</td>
<td>0.076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.089]</td>
<td>[0.112]</td>
<td>[0.090]</td>
<td>[0.105]</td>
<td>[0.092]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.366***</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-0.535</td>
<td>-0.068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[0.333]</td>
<td></td>
<td>[0.310]</td>
<td>[0.268]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point #1</td>
<td>-0.576**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-0.634**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.262]</td>
<td></td>
<td>[0.266]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point #2</td>
<td>1.043***</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-0.243</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[0.261]</td>
<td></td>
<td>[0.263]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Point #3</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.591*</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[0.263]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>840</td>
<td>866</td>
<td>883</td>
<td>859</td>
<td>871</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dependent variable listed above each column. Cell entries are probit/ordered probit coefficients with standard errors in brackets. * denotes p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01 using a two-tailed test.
### Appendix: Data Sources for Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Measurement/Descriptive Statistics</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Teacher Quality Reform Policies | Additive scale of 12 state level policies governing teacher pay and evaluation. NCTQ’s database tracked whether state policy provided for the following reforms to teacher pay and evaluation systems:  
1. Allow for additional pay for teaching certain subjects “high-needs” subjects?  
2. Allow for additional pay for high performance?  
3. Allow for additional pay for teaching in a “high-needs” (e.g. high poverty) school?  
4. Provide credit on the salary schedule for private school teaching experience?  
5. Provide credit on the salary schedule for postsecondary teaching experience?  
6. Provide credit on the salary schedule for private sector non-teaching experience?  
7. Is teacher performance defined/measured as improved student achievement outcomes?  
8. Can student test scores be used as a component of tenured teachers’ evaluations?  
9. Can student test scores be used as a component of non-tenured teachers’ evaluations?  
10. Does the state required use of a statewide teacher evaluation instrument?  
11. Is student performance (however defined) used in the evaluation of a tenured teacher?  
12. Is student performance (however defined) used in the evaluation of a non-tenured teacher? | NCTQ’s Teacher Rules, Roles, & Rights (TR3) Database (2009) |

Mean = 3.27, SD = 3.11, Range: 0 to 11
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Measurement/Descriptive Statistics</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White/African American Student Graduation Rate</td>
<td>Rates taken from NCE’ Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (0-100 percent)</td>
<td>National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2005-2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White: Mean = 80.09, SD = 7.25, Range: 62.7 to 91.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African American: Mean = 65.30, SD = 13.77, Range: 19.3 to 96.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Government Liberalism</td>
<td>Measure of state government ideological liberalism for 2006 (more liberal coded higher)  Mean = 48.94, SD = 26.85, Range: 10.00 to 94.77</td>
<td>Berry et al. (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of Student Population (logged)</td>
<td>Logged value of state’s public elementary and secondary student enrollment  Mean = 13.31, SD = 1.07, Range: 11.46 to 15.67</td>
<td>National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core Data (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Funding from State</td>
<td>Percent of total per-pupil spending that comes from state government  Mean = 49.55, SD = 14.10, Range: 25.9 to 89.9</td>
<td>National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core Data (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Union Campaign Contributions</td>
<td>Total percentage of political contributions made to candidates for state political office that were made by state teacher union/association affiliates (1998-2006)  Mean = 1.07, SD = .95, Range: .05 to 3.37</td>
<td>Hartney and Flavin (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Collective Bargaining Laws</td>
<td>State law mandates teacher collective bargaining (=3); permits bargaining (=2); or prohibits bargaining (=1) Mean = 2.57, SD = .67, Range: 1 to 3</td>
<td>NCTQ’s State Bargaining Rules Database (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Teacher Quality Reforms</td>
<td>Overall measure of state policymaking efforts to improve teacher quality in 2005.  Education Week assigned a grade (0-100) to each state based on its overall commitment to improving teacher quality as demonstrated by teacher reform policies and the actual qualifications of a state’s teacher workforce.  Mean = 76.37, SD = 8.54, Range: 61 to 93</td>
<td>Education Week’s Quality Counts 2005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Endnotes

1 In the nineteenth century, Horace Mann (the architect of America’s common schooling movement) referred to universally accessible public education as “the great equalizer.”

2 Throughout this article we use the term “achievement gap” to refer broadly to differences in K-12 educational outcomes between African American and white students regardless of whether those outcome differences are operationalized as test scores or attainment indicators. We purposefully retain the “achievement gap” language because the phrase has, in our view, become so entrenched in popular discourse as to become synonymous with broad inequalities in educational outcomes between racial groups.

3 Rouse (2007) finds that high school graduates earn approximately $260,000 more in lifetime earnings than non-graduates. Notably, earnings related “returns to schooling” are equally distributed across racial and ethnic groups (Barrow & Rouse, 2005). Returns to schooling do appear to be especially advantageous to African Americans in reducing some forms of social inequality, however. For example, Lochner and Moretti (2004) find evidence that African American students (but not white students) who complete high school are significantly less likely (3.4 percentage points) to be incarcerated later in life.

4 Notably, disparities in formal educational attainment have been shown to explain almost the entire gap in political participation between African Americans and whites (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). In other words, when differences in educational attainment are taken into account, African Americans are just as likely to participate in politics as white citizens.

5 In support of this claim, consider the fact that the last two presidential administrations have enacted major education reforms – President Obama’s Race to the Top program and President Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act – that devote significant attention to reforming the way K-12 teachers are recruited, compensated, and evaluated.

6 According to one leading scholarly summary of this research literature: “having five years of good teachers in a row (one standard deviation above average, or at the 85th quality percentile) could overcome the average seventh grade mathematics achievement gap between lower income kids (those on free or reduced price lunch program) and those from higher income families. In other words, high-quality teachers can make up for the typical deficits seen in the preparation of kids from disadvantaged backgrounds” (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004, 21).

7 For example, Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2004) find that the “single salary schedule” – the hallmark of most traditional teacher compensation systems – exacerbates the unequal distribution of teacher qualifications across
schools within districts, commonly resulting in the students with the highest needs having access to the least-
qualified teachers.

8 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Section 1001(3).

9 For example, Florida and Louisiana both received additional points in their RTTT grant applications for having
passed legislation seeking to remedy the inequitable distribution of highly effective teachers in their states.
Specifically, Louisiana enacted a series of pay incentives for teachers who agreed to work in high-poverty or high-
minority schools while Florida enacted a new law that requires that school districts do not disproportionately hire
unqualified and inexperienced teachers (Kershaw, Brennan-Gac, & Potemski, 2010).

10 Prior research guides us toward this particular theoretical expectation. Henderson, West, and Chingos (2010)
provide evidence that citizen evaluations of school quality are sensitive to educational outcomes. Berry and Howell
(2007) find that voters sometimes punish local school board members when student performance lags.

11 There are several ways to measure K-12 education outcomes across the states. We use a measure of attainment
(high school graduation rates) for several reasons. First, prior research on racial inequality and social policymaking
tends to focus on attainment measures (Hero, 2003; Hero & Tolbert, 1996; Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989).
Second, high school graduation is substantively important for economic mobility. In a review of the literature on
educational attainment and earnings, Rouse (2007) calculates a roughly $260,000 lifetime earnings premium for
high school graduates and concludes that “the basic ‘cross-sectional’ relationship…is a fairly good approximation of
the actual causal relationship” (Rouse, 2007, 100). Third, because we are interested in examining the link between
state education outcomes and citizens’ demand for state education reform policymaking, we need a measure of
education outcomes that are likely to register in the public’s consciousness. Here too, we believe graduation rates
offer the best measure. Citizens are likely to encounter the visible effects of living in a state with a high proportion
of high school dropouts, even while many of them are unlikely to be aware of how many students statewide are
proficient on math and reading standardized tests. Nevertheless, to examine the possibility that the results are driven
by our decision to use a measure of attainment rather than achievement, we also use state National Assessment of
Educational Progress (NAEP) math and reading scores for whites and African Americans to measure student
achievement and uncover substantively similar results to those reported in Table 1.

12 According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at the U.S. Department of Education, “the
averaged freshman graduation rate (AFGR) provides an estimate of the percentage of public high school students
who graduate on time – that is, four years after starting ninth grade – with a regular diploma. The rate uses aggregate student enrollment data to estimate the size of an incoming freshman class and aggregate counts of the number of diplomas awarded 4 years later” (Chapman, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2010, 12). These data are made available by NCES at: http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/xls/AFGR_Race_by_Gender_Table_2002_03_2008-09.xls. Because of small African American student populations in some states as well as the prevailing practice in some states of not disaggregating education outcomes by race/ethnicity in earlier years, list-wise deletion presents some challenges to our analysis. Specifically, Averaged Freshman Graduation Rates (AFGR) are not reliable enough to be calculated and are therefore not reported by the Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics in some states. Unfortunately, list-wise deletion is a common challenge when using state-level student achievement or attainment data that is disaggregated by race/ethnicity (regardless of the specific measure). We choose the AFGR measure, in part, because other defensible disaggregated attainment and achievement measures prior to 2006 (e.g., National Assessment of Educational Progress scores, Cumulative Proportion Index graduation rates, No Child Left Behind proficiency rates) had equal or in many cases higher levels of list-wise deletion. Consequently, states where we lack AFGR data include: Alabama, Idaho, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington. In addition, we lose Wyoming from our analysis due to missing data for the percentage of education financing that comes from the state.

13 *Education Week’s* report graded (0-100) states on five broad categories including: accountability for teacher quality, teacher pay reforms (e.g. merit pay), professional development, teacher evaluation reform, and teachers’ education and qualifications. Grades were rendered based on a state’s overall commitment to improving teacher quality as measured by both state policies and outputs (i.e., actual measures of teacher qualifications present within a state). For details on all of the indicators that comprise *Quality Counts*’ measure of teacher quality *Education Week* makes its archived reports available online at: http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2005/01/06/index.html. Details about measurement and descriptive statistics for each variable included in the model for Table 1 are reported in the Appendix.

14 One concern with comparing the coefficients for white and African American student graduation rates is that the two may highly correlate with one another across the states. If so, including both measures in a single regression model might lead to inflated standard errors that would make it nearly impossible to statistically distinguish the two coefficients from one another. For all models reported in this paper, we report the correlation between measures of
education outcomes for whites and African Americans in a footnote. For Table 1, white and African American graduation rates correlate at only .44 across the states which renders concerns about multicollinearity mute. This general pattern (i.e. weak correlations) holds for all the analyses reported in this paper. Moreover, when we completely drop white graduation rates from the model, we consistently find that African American graduation rates still bear no statistical relationship with state education reform policies.

15 Predicted values that report substantive effects for analyses throughout the paper are generated using the CLARIFY program (King, Tomz, & Wittenberg, 2000).

16 One possible explanation for why state education reform policymaking is responsive to white but no African American student outcomes is that white students numerically outnumber African American students in every state. Therefore, unequal responsiveness could simply be an artifact of policymakers’ tendency to respond to numerically larger groups at the expense of smaller groups. If so, we would expect that state policy would be more responsive to African American student outcomes in states with a greater percentage of African American students. To investigate this possibility, we create an interaction term between African American graduation rate and the percentage of public school students who are African American in a state. This interaction term is then included in a model with the same specification as reported in Table 1 (with the addition of the main effect for percentage African American students). The interaction term is not statistically different from zero, indicating that teacher reform policy is not more responsive to African American student outcomes as their share of a state’s student population grows. Alternatively, we might expect that state education reform policy will be more responsive to African American students’ education outcomes in states where the state legislature has a greater percentage of African American legislators (Owens, 2005). To examine this possibility, we create an interaction term between African American graduation rates and the percentage of state legislators who are African American. This interaction term is then included in a model with the same specification as reported in Table 1 (with the addition of the main effect for percentage African American legislators). The interaction term is statistically different from zero, but with a positive coefficient that is the opposite of what we would expect (since it indicates that as the percentage of African American legislators in a state grows, lower African American graduation rates actually predict fewer reform policies). This unexpected finding may be, in part, because African American legislators tend to be Democrats and Democrats have traditionally opposed the type of teacher quality reform policies under consideration in Table 1.
We also investigate if state policymakers are responsive to educational inequality by including a measure of the difference in graduation rates between white and African American students instead of the separate measure for each group. The coefficient for the difference measure is not statistically different from zero (p = .83), indicating that state policymakers are not more likely to enact teacher quality reform policies in states with larger differences between white and African American graduation rates.

Across the sample, 2.8% of respondents report education as the most important problem but that figure varies from a low of 0% to a high of 6.4% across state-years. For both 2004 and 2008, the NAES asked its “Most Important Problem” question in an open-ended format, which necessitated that we hand code and categorize responses. Although this process was relatively straightforward because the vast majority of respondents who named education as the most important problem gave the verbatim answer, “public education” or “our schools,” we employed a consistent set of rules to determine borderline cases. For example, we did not count answers that referred only to school violence (usually in direct reference to Columbine and/or school shootings). Nor did we count the many answers about religion and school prayer (e.g., “taking God out of the schools”). On the other hand, we did count respondents who mentioned multiple issues when one of the issues mentioned by the respondent education (e.g., a respondent whose verbatim answer was, “I’d have to say the poor state of our public schools and lack of quality health care”) as a respondent who deemed education to be the most important problem.

For 2003, white and African American graduation rates correlate at .11 across the states. For 2007, they correlate at .44.

Because respondents are clustered within states for each wave of the survey, we report standard errors clustered by state-year.

Specifically, we use the survey Moe (2001) commissioned for his book, *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public* (Brookings Institutions Press). Although Moe’s survey focused heavily on questions related to school vouchers, it also queried a nationally-representative sample of the American public about their support for other school reform proposals as well as their perceptions about the state of American public education more generally. We thank Terry Moe for sharing his data with us.

We measure high school graduation rates for whites and African Americans using data on high school four year completion rates provided by the U.S. Department of Education for 1996 because our preferred AFGR measure is
not available in racially disaggregated form for this earlier time period. Across the states, white and African American graduation rates correlate at .12.

23 Similar to Table 1, we also created an interaction term between African American graduation rate and the percentage of public school students who are African American in a state and included with the same model specification reported in Columns 1 and 2 of Table 2. In both estimations, the interaction term is not statistically different from zero, indicating that white citizens’ opinions about education are not more responsive to African American student outcomes in states with a greater percentage of African American students.


25 We argue that the advantages of internal and construct validity (as noted by Nicholson-Crotty and Meier, 2003) outweigh any potential concerns that the way Indianans balance competing concerns about school quality deviate much from citizens in other states. Indeed, our Indiana respondents hail from a diverse range of districts – from struggling urban ones that have flirted with mayoral takeovers such as Indianapolis to districts in suburban and rural communities which more closely resemble the modal district in the U.S.

26 Using GIS we linked residential addresses to latitude/longitude coordinates and overlaid those data points with a boundary file of Indiana school corporations allowing respondents to accurately be placed within their assigned “school corporation” of residence. Our thanks to Rachel Justis at STATS Indiana for helping us with this task. STATS is the statistical data utility center for the State of Indiana, developed and maintained by the Indiana Business Research Center at Indiana University’s Kelley School of Business.

27 ISTEP is the official state assessment Indiana uses for accountability purposes under No Child Left Behind.

28 Source: Indiana Department of Education. “Indiana K-12 Education Data.” Data available online within the department’s “Accountability System for Academic Progress Division” Available at: http://mustang.doe.state.in.us/SAS/sas1.cfm.

29 Question wording: “What about the public schools in your community? Would you say that they provide an excellent, good, fair, or poor education?” Item is coded 1-4 such that a more positive evaluation is coded higher.

30 Across school corporations in Indiana, white and African American test scores correlate at .51.

31 Only whites (the reference group) and African Americans are included in the analysis.