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Transcript

Tyler Bond

Welcome to Equity Matters, a podcast by the Program for Educational Equity and Policy at Syracuse University. In Equity Matters, we will interview education policy experts about the latest research on the causes and consequences of educational inequality and policies to address those inequalities. The vast majority of Americans believe that students deserve equal access to a quality education. However, our public school system exhibits socioeconomic, racial and geographic inequality, which leaves many students behind. Please join us for quarterly conversations about inequality in our public schools and how we can make our education system work for every student.

Sean Drake

-diverse, but also with a lot of inequality in housing, in jobs, in the education system. And I was fortunate growing up to go to schools that always had a lot of resources, had a lot of opportunities. But I was also often one of very few students of color in any class that I was ever in, and that was the case from when I began school all the way through high school in the city.

Sean Drake

And this was something that I would notice and that I would, you know, kind of - I started to have questions about maybe when I was in middle school. You know, why is it that very few students or teachers look like me at my school and my school has a lot of resources for students, and then a lot of my friends and family outside of school, you know, other kids who look like me were in very different schools with different resources, different facilities that just weren't as good, weren't as nice, didn't give them access to the opportunities that they deserve and that they needed. And that was something that really made an impression on me at a young age. I started to think about issues like affirmative action. I was growing up in California in the 90s when affirmative action was on the ballot in several elections and was a real hot button topic in the state and still is today. But it was really kind of coming to a fever pitch during that time. And these are things that I would talk about, that I would talk to, you know, talk to my parents about. So I was interested in, you know, other things that students my age were interested in, like, you know, maybe Michael Jordan or Tupac. So I was interested in kind of pop culture stuff for sure, but also interested in these, some of these social issues around education and some of the inequality that I was seeing both sides of in my education. And you know, I would ride the city bus and I would see who would get on and off at different stops. I'd ride it to and from school sometimes. And I would see the segregation of the city reflected in who would get on and off at which stops. And so I would see in terms of where people were getting on the bus that was residential segregation, where people were getting off the bus, kind of maybe heading to work was, you know, segregation in the labor market or segregation in schooling if other, you know, youth were going to school.

Sean Drake

These were all things that I kind of soaked in as a, you know, in my younger years and then as I moved through school, you know, through college, I had opportunities to study these dynamics in more detail to get some research experience. Which then motivated me to want to continue and earn a PhD in sociology and try to, you know, teach about these dynamics and this inequality, but also try to do, you know, research that could hopefully make a difference.

Tyler Bond

It's a very inspiring story. Having seen, you know, inequality from a very young age and then going on to research it. Well, nearly 70 years after Brown V Board of Education, school segregation endures. According to a UCLA report, segregation is now more severe than in the late 1960s. Why is racial segregation so widespread in our public schools?

Sean Drake

Yeah, it's a great question. You know it's something that scholars and educators and policymakers have been grappling with for decades. The number one driver of segregation in our public schools is the residential segregation of neighborhoods. Racial residential segregation is far and away the most consequential factor in the segregation of public schools. And the reason is because most public school students in the United States go to school close to where they live. That's the way that our public education system works. Schools have different residential catchment zones. So if you live in neighborhood X, then you are zoned for school X. If you live in neighborhood Y, then you are zoned for school Y. And so if neighborhood X and neighborhood Y are racially segregated then school X and school Y will be racially segregated almost to the same degree. And sure, we have school choice in various cities and different, you know, kind of different levels of effectiveness in terms of diversifying the public education system. You know, one of the ideas around school choice, one of the kind of progressive ideas around school choice is that your ZIP code should not determine the quality of your education. However, what we tend to see is that even with widespread school choice policies, such as in New York City, students end up either going to their neighborhood school anyway, or they end up going to a school that looks very much like their neighborhood school in terms of the level of segregation at the school, the resources at the school, so it hasn't really had the impact that maybe, you know, some of us would have hoped. And in some case, it can actually deepen the levels of racial segregation, you know, through various loopholes and you know, social networks that are more available to more privileged parents. So that's the reason why racial segregation is so widespread. Even policies like school choice that could move the needle a bit have a really hard time as long as neighborhoods remain as racially segregated as they are.

Tyler Bond

In your new book titled Academic Apartheid, you pull back the curtain on another mechanism of segregation. The book is based on 18 months of field work you performed in the Valley View Unified School District, located in Valley View, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. Could you please describe the Valley View Unified School District? And why this particular district attracted your attention?

Sean Drake

Yeah. So Valley View is an affluent suburban school district. It's a, you know- Valley View is a city in which the average household income is well over \$100,000. It's a city that attracts affluent immigrants

who move to it because of its good weather, it's relatively low rates of violent crime, and its stellar public school district. Stellar in terms of, you know, grades, test scores, college and university placement among graduates, graduation rates, things of that nature. And so I chose this particular district because there were schools in this district that reminded me of the high school that I went to and the racial composition of these high schools was such that black and Latin X students were a very low percentage of the population. And so I was interested originally in writing this book in settings that were similar to the ones that I found myself in when I was in high school, and those were situations and settings that seemed to be somewhat missing from the literature. I hadn't really read a lot of books or articles about students like me who were, you know, maybe the only black kid in class, or the only brown kid in class. And that was a dynamic that I would find at, you know, at Pinnacle High School, which is one of my two primary field sites in Valley View. I was also interested to see whether some of the dynamics of segregation and inequality that were operating in other districts, other more disadvantaged districts were also showing up in Valley View and maybe in more subtle ways. So that's what initially attracted me to Valley View, you know, and originally the book was going to be based on this one high school that I call Pinnacle High School. But over time, sort of organically, as I started to hang out on campus and do my field work, it expanded to be a 2-site kind of comparative case study of Valley View- of Pinnacle High School and then a very different high school in the same district, the same suburb that I call- a school that I call Crossroads.

Tyler Bond

Yeah. Can you tell us some of the difference between Pinnacle High School and Crossroads High and the moment in which you first discovered about Crossroads high and you know how that kinda shaped your understanding of the district.

Sean Drake

Yeah. So when I started this project, I was strictly at Pinnacle High School and Pinnacle High School is a very competitive academic environment. It's the kind of school where there's a significant amount of academic pressure on students. There's a lot of competition among students for, you know, comparing themselves on grades, test scores. It's a school where students are frequently taking multiple honors and Advanced Placement classes at the same time. It's a school where, you know, the cool kids are the ones who are getting 4.0 GPA's and above. So it has this very lofty, exacting, rigid conception of success that's based on sort of exceptional achievement on grades and test scores, with the ultimate goal of getting accepted to a well-known, prestigious university. And so that's the type of school that it is. You know, the graduation rate is almost a, it's almost 100%, almost 3/4 of graduates go immediately on to a four-year college and university, you know, many of them are going to University of California schools. You know, major flagship public institutions across the country, private institutions across the country, including Ivy League schools and other similar institutions, you know, California State schools are also, you know, quite popular. So it's a, it's a place where that level of achievement is, is the expectation among students. But there's also a lot of, you know, there's a lot of stress, there's a lot of lack of sleep. You know, there's, there's all those sorts of things that you might imagine would be some of the negative consequences of that sort of a pressure cooker environment.

Tyler Bond

Crossroads is very different, correct?

Sean Drake

Crossroads is very different, so I didn't even know that Crossroads existed when I started hanging out at Valley View. And what happened was I was hanging out in a sophomore U.S. history class and there were four black students in this class. I think there were 35 students total. And I would get a seating chart from Miss Miller, the teacher. She would hand me a seating chart every day when I would come in so that I could see who was in class that day. And I noticed one day that Jamal's name had been crossed off the list entirely. Jamal was one of the four black students in the class. He was only 15 years old, but he was the best player on the football and basketball teams and his name had been crossed off the list, which was different- the chart- than what Miss Miller would do if a student were absent. So I said that's interesting. Why has he been sort of crossed off in a sharpie? So after class I asked her what happened to Jamal. And she said that he had been transferred to Crossroads for credit recovery and that was all news to me in every way. I didn't know what Crossroads was. I didn't know what credit recovery meant. This is a few weeks into my field work. I thought there were 4 high schools in the district. This was a fifth high school called Crossroads. I asked what credit recovery was, what that meant. And she said, "Oh, you know, this is where you go- students go if they've fallen behind on credits, they can make their credits up and hopefully come back to Pinnacle to graduate." So I remember going home and I was sort of Googling it through the Valley View Unified School District website and immediately noticing some really stark disparities between Crossroads and all of the other comprehensive high schools in the district, including Pinnacle. So at Crossroads, students of color, namely black and Latino students, were over represented by roughly a factor of five. Asian American students were underrepresented by roughly a factor of five. The percentages of white students among comprehensive high schools in the district and at Crossroads were about the same. So a very, very different kind of racial composition, also very different rates of test scores on various standardized tests were much lower at Crossroads. I remember seeing right away that the number of students was very different at Crossroads or fluctuating between 2 and 300 students a year as they get transferred in multiple waves from other high schools. So nobody starts the year at Crossroads. You don't start 9th grade at Crossroads. Crossroads is a place that you go, you know, maybe if you've failed the same class twice or if your GPA dips below 2.0 or just if counselors, administrators, teachers think that you might be headed in that direction. It's not supposed to work that way, but they often would put pressure on students and families to transfer to crossroads, so it's a very, very different environment. It's a lot of stigma around Crossroads. It's not a school that has a very good reputation, a lot of negative stereotypes about the students who go to that school kind of being bad kids and being delinquent, you know, even though it's really just about academics, it's not about behavior. So, you know, a very, very different school. Also different in terms of the course offerings, the opportunities. So at Crossroads, there's no sports teams, there's no clubs, there's no PTA. It's just show up, do your packets, get your credit and leave. Also, graduates, no matter how well they do at Crossroads, are unable to go directly to a four-year college university, even if they get a 4.0 at the school. Because it doesn't offer enough classes to qualify a student to go to a four-year college. So it's really like a GED. It's kind of the bare minimum graduation requirements in terms of the curriculum for the state of California. So very, very different in a very, very different place. Last thing I'll say about it is just physically it was very different. So it's like the classrooms are in trailers and it's got a fence around it, like a metal fence around it. It's the only school in the district that has such a fence. Lots of asphalt. So it's, you know, it's not a very, it's not a welcoming, inviting space, you know. It doesn't look like any of the other high schools. And that's something that I- in my book, I write about how students notice this and how it made them feel very uncomfortable about going there every day.

Tyler Bond

So what you're describing is a barren academic environment. Once they're transferred, they can no longer go to a four-year school, and also a criminalizing environment that makes them feel punished and unwelcome. And also you mentioned in the book under constant surveillance by an armed guard, correct?

Sean Drake

Yeah. Yeah. So there were- there were police at all the high schools in the district but at Crossroads, the police presence was very different, so the police officer assigned to the school just had a much more active presence on the campus kind of doing a patrol, you know, monitoring things in a very kind of overt, conspicuous way. Sometimes searching, you know, searching backpacks. You know all of that sort of thing that I never once saw at Pinnacle. At Pinnacle, I would see there was a Valley View police officer there. But you know she would always be out at the front of the school, you know, helping with traffic or in the main office. And she had an office in the main- in kind of the main office. And so she'd be there. She would help with things like prom or school dance. She would create flyers to send home, you know, to parents and for students about, you know, substance abuse or, you know, other sort of public safety issues on campus, but she didn't really have a police presence on campus. Whereas at Crossroads, the officer there, he had a very strong police presence. He would leave his squad car parked right in front of the school. You know in a very, almost kind of a public show of law enforcement and just had a very different vibe. And so you sort of got the sense that at Pinnacle the police officer was meant to protect the school from outsiders. Whereas at Crossroads, the officer was sort of meant to protect Crossroads community members from other Crossroads community members and despite that fact, you know, in two years of field work, I saw exactly one fight at Crossroads. I actually saw more fights at Pinnacle than I saw at Crossroads, which is ironic given the kind of different posture that, you know, that law enforcement had at the two schools based on these stereotypes in the community.

Tyler Bond

So you described this concept of academic apartheid. Could you just give our audience an understanding of what exactly is academic apartheid and how is it used to diminish opportunities for some students, particularly at Crossroads High School in the Valley View Unified School District?

Sean Drake

Yeah, it's a great question. So you know apartheid is, you know, a term that I use here to be synonymous with segregation. You know, some people think that apartheid means South Africa and they sort of equate the word with South Africa. You know, apartheid is another word for segregation. It means separate and unequal, and it has this racialized connotation for sure, because of the way that it was used to describe a situation of extreme racial segregation and inequality in South Africa. But you know, certainly Jim Crow segregation in the United States is sort of a form of American apartheid. And so academic apartheid, what I'm referring to is segregation. I'm referring to school segregation, but specifically academic segregation. The difference there is, I'm talking about the opportunities that students have, the access to resources, the access to opportunity. And not just opportunity in high school, but opportunities that build from your high school experience. So opportunities that one may have as they move, you know, on to post-secondary schooling or to getting a job after they graduate.

And those opportunities were very, very different between Pinnacle and Crossroads. So the academic apartheid, I think, you know, is reflected in the experiences that students have at those two schools and the opportunities, the access to resources at those schools, and then the ways in which that inequality actually impacts what they can do, their options after high school. And so that's where that term apartheid comes from. You know, I wanted a term that really captured the, you know, how stark this inequality is. And that was the term that I felt like really did justice to what I was seeing. So it's sort of like a form of tracking. Within schools, we often see tracking where you have Advanced Placement courses, honors courses, then maybe college prep courses. And then some, you know, levels of remedial courses below that and you know what I really document in the book is a form of tracking that happens between schools rather than within them and so that's really what academic apartheid is referring to.

Tyler Bond

You talk about something called an institutional success frame at Pinnacle High. If you're- if you don't go to a prestigious 4-year college, you're branded as a failure. And many students that you talked with preferred to attend Community College, trade schools or vocational schools, because just not all students are ready for four-year schools. But they were, you know, deemed as kind of second-class citizens, right?

Sean Drake

So the institutional success frame is what I was describing earlier. At Pinnacle, it means getting a 4.0 GPA, taking multiple honors and Advanced Placement classes, staying up late to study for exams and to do other projects. You know, also being involved in clubs and other extracurricular activities. Getting accepted to a four-year college and university, preferably one that's, you know, quite prestigious and well known. That's all part of the institutional success frame, this sort of collective interpretation of academic success, of academic achievement that's really cultivated by institutional actors at the school. So students, parents, teachers, administrators, even you know, staff, even people who were involved in classroom activities, they all kind of knew what it meant to be a student at pinnacle.

Tyler Bond

One last thing that struck out for me is that there were so few students of color at Pinnacle High that they formed a club. They formed the Blackout club, which gave a sense of belonging and academic support for Pinnacle's few students of color. They also aim to prevent people from transferring to Crossroads High. So how do you- what can we learn from this club?

Sean Drake

Yeah, great question. So it's interesting. You know, Pinnacle High School was- it was a very diverse school in terms of race and ethnicity. You know, for example, white students were the numerical minority at Pinnacle. So you know, Asian American students were the largest share of students at that school. And there was a, you know, a decent amount of, you know, ethnic diversity within the Asian population and the student body. What- where the sort of- where blackout came in was that there weren't many black or Latino students at Pinnacle and Blackout was a club that was started by a student who really felt like there was a need for a space on campus for, you know, black and brown students to be able to come together and meet regularly, talk about different issues, you know, related to race and inequality and racism. You know, this was kind of in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement.

That's really when this club started and this was a space where students would come in and talk about things that were bothering them. They would also share, you know, share successes among the group if somebody did well, really well on a, you know, on a big class project or if someone was involved in an extracurricular activity and had some success or had a, you know, a good experience or things that maybe weren't going so well and students could lift each other up. So it was actually a really diverse group. You know, there were students from kind of all racial and ethnic backgrounds represented in blackout. But it was definitely, you know, predominantly black and Latino students in this group, and it took place in a classroom, you know, a student- a teacher gave up her classroom during the lunch period and I'm forgetting now how frequently the group met. But they met at least once a month and often had, you know, over a dozen students, you know, 15 students, twenty students at every single, every meeting. Sometimes they would talk about things that they felt like had been glossed over or just ignored or not talked about in their classes, particularly in their classes on history or social studies or government. You know things like that where they felt like race was a really big part of the discussion that wasn't being discussed in class. So they would come in and say, "yeah, we talked about this in class, but we didn't touch on these things. And I think these are things that are really, really important. You know, we talked- we learned about this stuff in the civil rights movement, but we don't talk about, you know, all of these, you know, all of these folks who maybe were more behind the scenes, but maybe just as influential, you know, as other leaders who kind of make it into the history books." So you know, those were really powerful, I think, and important discussions for those students to build a sense of community, especially because often those- these are the students who felt, you know, felt alienated, felt isolated, felt marginalized. You know, felt that sense of social isolation that comes from, you know, from being one of- one of few, you know, black or brown students in a, in a classroom or in the entire school.

Tyler Bond

And being in such a competitive school environment no less.

Sean Drake

Yeah, I think- I think that just added to it, you know. I mean many of these students are, you know, as you might imagine, quite good students. But I think that it was important for them to have a place to just, you know, kind of cut loose and you know, talk about those things. And honestly, I think a lot more students at the school would have benefited from a space like that. But I think particularly this group. Because you know collectively, just looking at the Black and Latino population at Pinnacle High School, it was less than 10% of the student body combined. And so you know, this is a space where those students could come together and sort of build a sense of community and a sense of belonging at the school that I think a lot of them are really searching for before this club was started.

Tyler Bond

Lastly, what lessons can policymakers draw from your research in order to decrease racial segregation and inequality?

Sean Drake

Yeah, I think that's a great question. So a lot of the book is focused on the sort of credit recovery, you know, credit recovery issue. You know, I think more broadly, when we're talking about school

segregation- you know, as I said in the beginning, residential segregation is the biggest issue. It's the reason why it's really, really hard to, you know, really move the needle effectively on school segregation. So you know, any policy that's aimed at reducing levels of school segregation, you know, I think has to include, you know, remedies for the really high rates of residential segregation that we continue to see in this country. So I'll just say that at the top. In terms of some of these sort of hidden mechanisms of segregation and inequality that I uncover in the book and the sort of credit recovery system of which crossroads and many other schools across the country are apart, there's roughly half a million students in continuation schools like Crossroads, you know, at any given time, in- throughout the country. So I think, you know, moving forward, a more equitable approach to credit recovery would be to establish, you know, credit recovery programs at comprehensive high schools so that credit deficient students could remain at their comprehensive high school and avoid being segregated to, you know, a separate, you know, kind of separate and unequal high schools, you know, and continuation school system that often fails to engage them, that's stigmatizing, but doesn't really prepare them for life after high school. So I think that's definitely one, you know, one thing that, you know, that could happen. You have students doing credit recovery at their comprehensive high school, rather than needing to go to a separate and very different school, you know, this would also keep students connected to the resources at their comprehensive high schools, which are often much more than the resources that continuation and alternative high schools can provide. It would maintain continuity in their education, keep them around some of their friends, you know, and I think that would just keep- kind of regularize their high school experience rather than sort of diverting them on a very separate path. It feels and often is quite punitive. So then you know you have these continuation school sites. If you were to, you know, change the policy and do it in that way you would still have these continuation schools which are at these separate sites. So what would you do with those sites? And I think that they could be repurposed as vocational education centers. You know, some students want to learn trade, they want to work, you know, right after high school, they don't want to go to a four-year college or even a 2-year college and then transfer. You know, college isn't for everybody as much as maybe we want it to be or we think that it should be. It's not. And so I think that you know, continuation school sites could be repurposed as vocational education centers. You know, summer school hubs or multi-purpose spaces for the district. And so I think those steps, at least in terms of what I document in the book, you know, those steps would create a more balanced and inclusive system of credit recovery, and I think you know importantly, it would be a system in which schools with the most resources like Pinnacle High School would really be accountable to every student. They wouldn't be able to just have dumped those students at a different school. You know they would sort of, you know, be accountable to those students. Which I think is an important part of public education.

Tyler Bond

Thank you for joining us, Dr. Drake, on our premiere episode. I encourage everyone to read Dr. Drake's book. It's called "Academic Apartheid: Race and the Criminalization of Failure in an American Suburb." Thank you for joining us, Dr. Drake.

Sean Drake

Thank you. And you can get the book on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, maybe even target. There's a couple different prices if you go on Amazon. There's a hardcover price, you don't have to pay that. Soft cover is cheaper. So yeah, I really appreciate it. And I hope if you do pick the book up, that despite the

subject matter, I hope you enjoy it. And thank you very much, Tyler, for having me today. I really appreciate it.

Tyler Bond

Everybody go out and buy the book. Thank you.

Sean Drake

Thank you.

Tyler Bond

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