

# Study finds link between school desegregation and midlife cognitive function

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Black and white first-graders attend class together in Charlotte, N.C., in 1973. A new UMD public policy study shows that experiencing elementary school desegregation in the mid-20th century was associated with higher midlife cognitive function among Black Americans. Credit: Warren K. Leffler/Library of Congress

Exposure to state-level school desegregation during primary school was associated with higher midlife cognitive function among Black

Americans who grew up in the U.S. South from the 1950s to 1970s, according to new findings by a University of Maryland public policy researcher.

Professor Katrina Walsemann, the Roger C. Lipitz Distinguished Chair in Health Policy, was the lead author of the recently published [article](#) in the journal *Social Science & Medicine* that focused on a representative sample of midlife adults who attended [elementary school](#) in the South.

An especially significant study observation: Black adults in the study presumed to have had five years of exposure to desegregated primary schooling had similar cognitive function scores as their white peers, effectively eradicating Black-white cognitive disparity. This association remained even after adjusting for state-level education quality and [education levels](#).

"Though we cannot say this is a causal effect, it does suggest that access to equitable schooling, particularly during [primary school](#), can be an important tool for reducing race inequities in cognitive function and dementia later in life," Walsemann said. "This is still relevant today, as many students continue to attend segregated schools that receive disparate funding."

In contrast to Black adults, greater exposure to desegregated primary schooling was not associated with cognitive function for white adults.

The study's findings hold substantial implications for education and policy initiatives focused on early-life educational experiences, emphasizing the importance of ensuring equitable access to quality education, the researchers said.

"Presently, we have policymakers who are attempting to ban the teaching of structural racism in U.S. schools," Walsemann said. "Our study

suggests that state actions that excluded Black Americans from equitable access to education continue to resonate into midlife. Rather than ignoring this legacy, policymakers should focus on redressing it by developing policies that ensure every child has equitable access to a high quality [education](#)."

**More information:** Katrina M. Walsemann et al, State-level desegregation in the U.S. South and mid-life cognitive function among Black and White adults, *Social Science & Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116319](#)

Provided by University of Maryland

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