

Chapter 4

SCHOOLING

FOR DECADES, ORANGE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA—HOME TO Richard Nixon, Disneyland, Botox, and *The Real Housewives of Orange County*—connoted wealthy, white, conservative suburbia. Picture-perfect cities lined the coast and multimillion-dollar beach homes glittered in the famously year-round sunshine. Sandwiched between Los Angeles County to the north and San Diego County to the south, it was the epicenter of escapist luxury and trophy wives on raw-food diets.

That image has, however, been gradually altered by large-scale demographic changes over the last 40 years. Since 1970 the population of Orange County has more than doubled to over 3 million people. The county is now the sixth most populous in the country and, in absolute numbers, the sixth most rapidly growing. Immigration explains much of that growth, prompting one observer to call Orange County “the Ellis Island of the twenty-first century.”¹ By 2013, 46 percent of the county’s population spoke a language other than English at home.² Latino immigrants today make up more than a third of the population (up from only

15 percent in 1980) and account for nearly half of the county's K–12 students.

Orange County includes 34 incorporated cities, many of them worlds apart. As one local demographer puts it, “You have areas of poverty and areas of great affluence and less of a middle.”³ Laguna Beach, for example, is 91 percent non-Hispanic white, with a per capita income of \$84,000, whereas Santa Ana, the county seat, just 20 miles away, is 95 percent Hispanic (50 percent foreign-born), with a per capita income of \$17,000.

Most Latinos in Orange County live in the impoverished cities of the inland valleys of the northern half of the county, among them Santa Ana. A 2004 report by the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government identified Santa Ana as the Most Troubled City in America because of its high unemployment, high poverty rate, undereducated population, and crowded housing. Latinos in Orange County are more likely to live not only in poverty but also amidst street violence and gang activity. Santa Ana alone is home to 29 street gangs.⁴

However, many upwardly mobile middle-class Latinos (mostly second- or third-generation descendants of immigrants) are moving rapidly from impoverished Latino areas in Los Angeles and Orange County into formerly white Orange County communities. Between 1990 and 2010, the percentage of Latino residents in each of the county's predominantly white, affluent cities increased. In north Fullerton, the home of Cal State Fullerton, where the median household income was roughly \$100,000 in 2012, the percentage of Latinos more than doubled from about 10 percent to 25 percent. Though Fullerton is far from the most opulent part of Orange County, the draw for these Latinos is clear: high-quality schools, a thriving economy, and increasingly rich cultural pluralism.

The net result of these demographic transitions is that economic inequality *within* the Latino community in Orange County has grown significantly during the past four decades, just as it has *within* the black community in Atlanta. The percentage of Latino families living on less

than \$25,000 a year (in inflation-adjusted dollars) nearly doubled between 1970 and 2010, from 13 percent to 25 percent, at the same time that the percentage living on more than \$100,000 a year rose from 12 percent to 17 percent. In short, Orange County is now home to more impoverished Latinos *and* more affluent Latinos.⁵

This inequality is also reflected in Orange County schools. Consider two high schools that “input” measures (see Table 4.1) suggest are surprisingly similar: Troy High School in Fullerton and Santa Ana High School. Spending per pupil at the two schools is comparable, for example, as are the student-teacher ratios, the number of guidance counselors, and two standard measures of teacher quality: formal education and experience. Troy offers a richer menu of extracurricular activities than Santa Ana, but, as we shall see, private fund-raising explains that difference, not unequal investment by the school districts. On the measures most obviously controlled by school systems—spending, teacher quantity and quality, and counseling—the two schools seem broadly similar.

What is decidedly *not* similar about these two schools, however, are their student populations, as measured by poverty rates, ethnic backgrounds, English proficiency, and even physical fitness. Santa Ana students are overwhelmingly poor and Latino and heavily Spanish-speaking, whereas Troy students come from ethnically diverse, economically upscale backgrounds. More striking still are the contrasts in the “output” measures of the two schools—graduation rates, statewide academic and SAT test scores, truancy and suspension rates. Students at Santa Ana are four times more likely than students at Troy to drop out, roughly ten times more likely to be truant or suspended, and only one third as likely to take the SAT. If they do take the SAT, on average they score in the bottom quartile nationwide, whereas the average SAT taker at Troy scores in the top 10–15 percent.

In this chapter, we will meet children from two Mexican American families with firsthand experience of these two schools: Isabella and her parents, Clara and Ricardo, who live in north Fullerton, just a few blocks from Troy High; and Lola and Sofia, two sisters who were raised

by their grandparents in central Santa Ana, just a few blocks from Santa Ana High.⁶ Their stories reveal a great deal about how the crosscurrents of family, economics, ethnicity, and schools influence kids' opportunities.

Table 4.1: Characteristics of Troy and Santa Ana High Schools, 2012

	City	Troy High School, Fullerton	Santa Ana High School, Santa Ana
	Student body size	2565	3229
School Resources	Spending per pupil	\$10,326	\$9,928
	Teachers' average years of service	14.9	15.0
	Teachers with master's degree	69%	59%
	Student-teacher ratio	26:1	27:1
	Guidance counselors	5	7
	Sports/arts/language extracurricular activities	34	16
Student Community	Students eligible for free/reduced price lunch (based on family poverty)	14%	84%
	Latino ethnicity	23%	98%
	Limited English proficiency	4%	47%
	Passed 6/6 fitness tests	70%	32%
Outcomes	Graduation rate	93%	73%
	California state Academic Performance Index (API) (out of 1,000)	927	650
	API compared to all California high schools	Top 10%	Bottom 20%
	Students who take SATs	65%	20%
	Average SAT	1917	1285
	Truancy rate	2%	33%
	Suspensions per 100 students	3	22
	Overall ranking among all 67 Orange County high schools ⁷	3	64

Clara, Ricardo, and Isabella

Clara and Ricardo, both in their 50s, grew up in the 1970s in an impoverished Hispanic ghetto in South Central Los Angeles. By the 1990s they had become successful professionals, and in search of safe neighborhoods and stellar schools they moved to Fullerton with their growing family (Michael, now 27; Isabella, now 20; and Gabriel, now 15). Today they live in a large ranch-style house on a peaceful cul-de-sac and are well integrated into the Orange County middle class. To reach the house, we drive up into the hills, past palm trees, upscale shopping plazas, and Spanish colonial-style homes. It's a mostly upper-middle-class Anglo neighborhood, and the Latinos who live here tend to be even more affluent than their white neighbors.⁸ "People here are friendly and trusting," Isabella will later tell us, "because it's a safe area."

We meet in the comfortable living room, facing glass doors opening onto a patio, a serene blue pool, and a colorful garden. Pictures of Isabella in dance costumes accent a grand piano. The adjacent dining room provides a calm space for conversation and homework, an environment that served as a refuge from Troy High School, which all three children attended and where, Clara reports, you can feel quivers of anxiety, as kids compete for the highest SAT scores and spots at Harvard, Stanford, and NYU. Her kids have had a very different experience growing up here than Clara and Ricardo had growing up a generation ago in South Central LA.

Clara and her twin brother, Francisco, were born and raised in a small Mexican village. Their father had come to California on his own as a bracero railway worker during World War II, and when Clara and Francisco were eight, he brought his entire family (the twins, their mother, and two older siblings) as legal immigrants to Los Angeles. Because family resources were scant, they settled first in Watts, a poverty-stricken, gang-ridden, mostly black neighborhood. As light-skinned Hispanics they stood out, and Clara has vivid memories of being chased home by black kids from school through a darkened freeway underpass.

That said, she also recalls that she and her brother were occasionally shepherded home by friendly black teachers. Seeking greater safety, the family moved around South Central and southeastern Los Angeles, always in poor, mostly Latino neighborhoods. “We grew up in a community where it was low-income, lots of drugs,” Clara says, adding that many of her classmates in junior high and high school were “fried” from habitually sniffing glue.

Latino gangs—whom Clara calls “cockroaches”—dominated the schools that she and her brother attended.

We witnessed the initiation of [would-be] gang members, where they get beat up badly by the gang members. The word is “courted.” You get courted into the gang, and they time it for two to three minutes, and you’re not supposed to fight back. If you fall down, they’ll hurt you more, so it shows that you’re tough if you’re up, bloodied and bruised, both girls and boys. Back then it was just fistfights and maybe bats from time to time. Nowadays to get initiated into these gangs, they shoot people in the community, even innocent bystanders. I am ashamed of it as part of our culture.

Now a pediatric social worker, Clara has well-formed ideas about why gang culture took hold in the schools she attended. “I think it comes from the lack of family cohesion,” she says, “Many families in the community were dysfunctional.”

Clara’s parents, neither of whom had gone beyond the third or fourth grade in Mexico, gave their kids lots of support and modeled a strong work ethic. They stressed the importance of doing well in school, and even though they had no idea what college was, they encouraged Clara and Francisco to become professionals. The children were sheltered from financial stress. Clara recalls that their father did occasionally take them to pick strawberries on weekends to help make ends meet, but even so she did not think of her family as poor. Her older siblings were politically and culturally sophisticated, and she grew up going to foreign films, discussing literature, and, she says, “listening to Bob Dylan and Joan Baez.”

Clara and her brother Francisco attended schools in LA that she describes as “very tough,” but the two were outstanding students and received strong, even loving support from their teachers, both black and white. In fact, recognizing that Clara and Francisco came from a disadvantaged background, on weekends their teachers sometimes took them with their own families to Disneyland and Knott’s Berry Farm. “They were our role models and our mentors,” Clara says. “We said, ‘We’re going to do well academically, and we’re going to challenge ourselves, because we need to get out of the neighborhood.’”

Both Clara and Francisco found conscientious, caring counselors—mentors at school who helped them get scholarship aid for college—and, in Clara’s case, a graduate degree.⁹ Today both have become successful Orange County professionals—Clara as a social worker and Francisco as a financial advisor. “I wanted to make a difference in my community,” Clara says, explaining her choice of profession, “hoping that fewer kids were going into gangs and drugs.”

Clara and Francisco’s story provides a classic example of upward mobility among second-generation immigrants. “We’re pretty Mexican at home,” Clara says of their assimilation, “but at work we’re totally Americanized.” Both have made a point of taking their children back to see the still grim neighborhood where they grew up. “In just one generation you can make that leap,” Francisco admonished his kids, “but in one generation you can make the leap back.”

After graduating from a major local university, suffering through an unsuccessful first marriage, and supporting herself for several years as a single mom (of Michael), Clara met Ricardo at their tenth high school reunion. They married, and in the years that followed had two more children, Isabella and Gabriel. During those early years of their marriage, Clara created a rapidly growing social work program at a local hospital, and then moved into a successful private psychotherapy partnership, while Ricardo, for his part, became a successful architect and then took on the role of project manager at a major nonprofit.

As Isabella reached school age, Clara and Ricardo moved to Fullerton in search of better, safer schools. Clara explains:

In LA most middle-class or professional Hispanics move to areas where they have better schools, because most of us grew up in the inner city, and so we were familiar with what [our children] would be exposed to—gangs and violence and probably lower-level education, unfortunately, where the teachers are basically managing the students. We knew exactly what we wanted for our kids. We wanted them to compete with the kids that go to Ivy League schools. So for us it's education, education, education for our children.

She goes on to describe how they ended up in their current neighborhood:

We specifically chose to live here so that they could go to Troy High School. My husband and I checked the high schools and their SAT scores. We also checked for their standardized testing at the elementary level, and we wanted to make sure that the elementary teachers were well trained and very highly motivated.

Even at the preschools, I interviewed all the teachers, because it's not cheap. If you go to private here, it's \$700 to \$900 a month. I wanted to know what their educational background was, and how they handled children that they needed to discipline appropriately, and that it was all pro-social skills and how they managed their classroom. I wanted to make sure that the preschools were clean and had enough staff per ratio for the children at all times. And the composition of the children and the families was important to me. I wanted [my kids] to really develop their language skills.

When Isabella entered kindergarten, Clara discovered that her teacher was in her first year of teaching and “not very organized,” so she resolved to help. “What can we do as parents,” she asked the teacher, “to make you succeed as a teacher for my daughter?” Soon she decided to get involved in the classroom herself. At least once a week that year, she hired a baby-sitter for Gabriel, so that she could volunteer in the

class. She committed herself to the school, she says, because it offered a Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program, which she hoped her kids would enter (as eventually they did). She also got to know the ladies from the school office. “If I ever call and ask about my daughter,” she says, explaining her tactics, “they know who I am.”

Clara rivals Wendy (in Port Clinton) and Simone (in Atlanta) in the depth of her commitment to raising her kids. During the years they were in school, she worked only part-time, because her priority—“my greatest challenge, my greatest accomplishment, my legacy”—was doing everything she could for her kids. Even before kindergarten, she and Ricardo spent a lot of time reading to their kids. “By the time they were in kindergarten,” she says, “they were reading Dr. Seuss, and could count to 100 and write their names.” The family always had dinner together.

During the summer Clara got math and reading workbooks for her kids, and took them to classes at UC Irvine and Cal State Fullerton. “That’s also why we moved here,” she says, “because the university was next to us, and I knew they offered courses for their age group. I did whatever it took to make sure that my kids were ahead a year. All three kids have always tested at least a grade or two above.”

Troy High School

Isabella and her brothers all attended Troy High School, just down the hill from their home. Troy is a public magnet school, and by most academic measures is exceptional—in 2013 *Newsweek* ranked it as the 47th best high school in America. Kids from outside the district have to take a highly competitive entrance exam, and according to Clara only about 400 students are selected from among several thousand applicants each year. Troy offers a highly demanding science-and-technology track (dubbed Troy Tech) and an almost equally demanding International Baccalaureate curriculum, along with dozens of Advanced Placement courses. The school is a perennial winner of such national competitions

as the Science Olympiad and academic decathlons, and its computer science curriculum is said to be among the best in the world. Ninety-nine percent of its graduates go on to college, 76 percent to four-year institutions, and 23 percent to community colleges. The student body is racially diverse, with 46 percent Asian American, 24 percent non-Hispanic white, 23 percent Latino, and 6 percent black and mixed-race minorities, though it is much less diverse in terms of its students' socioeconomic backgrounds (as we saw in Table 4.1).

Isabella is full of enthusiasm for the school. "All the teachers are really great," she says, "and they're always there to help." Kira, a classmate of hers with whom we also spoke, adds depth to this portrait of caring teachers. During her freshman year her English teacher learned that Kira's father had recently died, and reached out to her. "She talked to me about it," she says, "and said, 'If you ever need anyone, let me know.' I could just go into her classroom during lunch and talk it out with her. I still talk to her."

The quality of the students and curriculum at Troy virtually ensured that the academic atmosphere was highly competitive. Clara reports that in her elder son's graduating class, 15 students got 2400 on their SATs—that is, perfect scores. Isabella emphasizes that Troy is a pressure-cooker for the students.

Some of my friends began practicing for the SAT in our freshman year. People would get 2200, and half would say, "I have to go back and take it again." Everybody is friends and everything, but sometimes you can feel it. The only bad thing about that is that it's almost like a double-edged sword that you have to be in the top 10–12 percent. Getting Bs was considered failing.

I went back this August to speak in an old class of mine to seniors about college applications, and being back in that environment I could actually feel it this time. When you're in it, you don't really think about it, but coming back I could really feel like the pressure that they had on themselves. You're in a bubble at Troy.

Even extracurricular participation was highly competitive. Isabella, an excellent writer, learned this when she applied to work on the student newspaper. “They interview applicants in freshman year,” she says, “and when I interviewed, I wasn’t ready for it. Fifty people had interviewed, and they were only going to accept two. It’s very prestigious, because those kids go into journalism at Berkeley, Stanford, all the top schools.”

Stereotypically, competition at Orange County high schools is about nice clothes and fancy cars, but at Troy, Isabella insists, “it didn’t feel like that. It was mostly stress from academics. I guess at other schools if somebody called you a ‘nerd,’ it was an insult, but it just wasn’t at Troy. You wanted to do better than . . . I don’t want to say better than other people [laughs], but as well as.”

Where the competitive pressure at Troy comes from is an interesting question. Isabella says her parents didn’t pressure her and her siblings. “They always wanted to make sure that we did the best that we could do,” she says. “And if maybe I didn’t get the best grade [they would say], ‘Well, you tried your best. Just do better next time.’” On the other hand, as she and her mother explain, pressure from other parents on their kids tends to spread across the school.

“Tiger Moms!” is how Clara succinctly sums up her fellow mothers. “[When] kids would not do as well as they had wanted to do on a test,” Isabella explains, “they wouldn’t want to go home, because their parents would be waiting there to say, ‘Okay, let me see your score. What’s wrong? Why did you not do as well on this one?’” She adds, “A lot of people have got pressure on them from home to do really well to get into top schools. And sometimes they just put it on themselves, that pressure to want to do well, especially when you’re competing with other people who are doing really well, too. It sets the bar high.”

The result, Isabella says, is that “everyone is constantly stressed.” She and her classmate Kira independently describe their typical school day in virtually identical terms: arrival at school 7:00 a.m., classes and then sports or other extracurriculars until 4:00 or 5:00 p.m., followed by four to six hours of homework after dinner, which left only five to six hours

a night for sleep. “It was not a competition,” Isabella says about the sleep, “but we’d say, ‘Oh, I only got six hours.’ ‘Oh, well, I only got four hours!’” “I did more all-nighters in high school than I have in college,” Kira says. “You’re in robot mode, and you can’t enjoy anything that way.”

Clara and Ricardo helped out as much as they could with homework. “My husband is the one that does the math homework,” Clara says. “All through high school, if they needed anything with writing, he would review their essays or their math. I did the easy stuff when they were in elementary, but once it got to higher math, he took over.” But they also urged their kids to avoid overreaching, as in the case of one math class that Isabella took during her freshman year. “My husband and I went to the open house,” Clara says, “we looked at her book, and we didn’t understand it, and my husband says, ‘Drop it.’ It looked like Chinese to us. We couldn’t help her. She hated the class, and I thought, *Why are we going to set her up to fail?* So we said, ‘Drop it.’ And she dropped the class.”

Like many other Troy parents, Clara ensured that her kids took full advantage of the array of extracurricular activities available at school and in the wider community. “Soccer, baseball, Girl Scouts, art, piano, dance,” she said, listing some of the activities to which she regularly drove her kids, in addition to driving them to school every day and bringing them lunch at school once a week. “I got three speeding tickets in 18 months, going everywhere!”

Troy High offers more than 100 different extracurricular clubs, each with its own advisor and at least ten active members—and that doesn’t include athletics. Among the possibilities: Amnesty International, the Anime Club, the Archery Club, the Chess Club, the Coptic Club, the Drama Club, the Gay-Straight Alliance, the iStocks Investment Club, the Live Poets Society, the Math Club, the Muslim Club, the Polynesian Club, Serve A Soldier, World Vision, and Young Americans for Freedom. Each year, Troy produces all sorts of championship teams and ensembles, too, in band, basketball, chorus, cross-country, swimming, tennis, water polo, wrestling, and xylophone. “Even our dance team goes to nationals every year,” Clara says proudly.

Running was Isabella's favorite extracurricular activity. "I just love the team and the coaches, because school was always so stressful," she says, "it was always real nice after school to have that break for exercise, and just to breathe." She mentions in passing that she was co-captain of the cross-country team and wrote the script for her class's video yearbook.

Troy is able to mount such an astonishingly wide range of extracurricular activities because of very active fund-raising among parents and community members. Many activities have an associated booster group. Clara explains that like other parents, they regularly donate money to the schools. "That's how they get laptop computers for all the kids in the tech program, and even in the elementary schools," Clara says. "The parents want their children to be well prepared technically. My girlfriend Samantha easily donates \$1,000 a year to her elementary school, because she thinks it's cheaper—her daughter was at a private school, and it's \$12,000 to \$15,000 a year. So for her to donate \$1,000 is nothing."

On top of all of this, the kids at Troy (and their parents) invest lots of time and energy in SAT preparation. Three times a week, for example, Isabella had to fit three-hour prep sessions into her schedule, plus a one-time "practice SAT day." Kira also attended an SAT prep summer program at the high school. "I just felt like I needed a little bit more help to feel more confident, she says. Adding, "In our junior year there were a few people who started bringing their books to study for the SAT in the five minutes between classes. It went a little overboard [laughs]."

Because they always have so much to do, Clara complains, the kids at Troy "hardly socialize," and may attend only one or two dances a year. Isabella agrees. "A lot of people didn't really have lives outside of school," she says. As she reflects on her kids' high school experience, you can almost hear Clara the ambitious mother and Clara the child counselor arguing with one another. "It's a lot of pressure for them. It's the one thing my husband and I don't like about this school. Academically, you have to [work hard] to get into top schools, unfortunately, [but] they're taking the fun out of it."

Isabella reflects the same ambivalence: “High school was really stressful, really terrible,” she says. “But it was a really good education, and it really prepared me for college. I’ve never really done well in math, and I’m doing really well now.” Despite struggling with advanced math at Troy, as a college sophomore she’s tutoring seven college freshmen in pre-calculus.

When the time came, Clara and Ricardo actively helped their kids with their college applications. “Some of these essays from USC and Penn and NYU were difficult,” Clara says. “You have to be very mature to answer some of those questions. Ricardo is a very good writer, and he’s the one I give a lot of the credit to. I think he helped you [Isabella] and Michael maneuver the application process. And with Michael, I submitted his application to several friends of mine—they were professors and one was a university dean—just so I could get their feedback. We were new, and I wanted to make sure Michael would get accepted to the schools that he was applying to, because it is so competitive.”

Both Michael and Isabella got into virtually all the colleges to which they applied. Michael graduated from an Ivy League institution, but by the time Isabella was ready for college, Clara and Ricardo, like many middle-class parents, had been hit by the Great Recession and worried about paying for college. So they encouraged Isabella to choose a local university, well known for its writing program, and in the end she decided to go there instead of the much more expensive, top-flight Eastern university that she preferred. Knowing that she will graduate without debt and thus have the option of graduate school, Isabella and her parents are confident that they have made a smart decision about her future.

Lola and Sofia

In off-peak traffic it’s a 15-minute straight shot down the Orange Freeway from the pleasant hills around Troy High School to the neighborhoods of two-bedroom bungalows in the flats around Santa Ana High

School. In the early afternoon sun the area seems peaceable enough. Only the locksmith shops, storefronts like Bad Boy Bail Bonds, the sheriff's forensic lab, and the chain link fences around each house hint that we've entered the most dangerous urban battlefield in Orange County.¹⁰ On the porch of one bungalow we are greeted by two sisters, Lola (29), looking pale and tired, and Sofia (21), tall and thin, with plastic-rimmed glasses. Sofia is pretty, but shy, while Lola offers maternal encouragement to her.

The house itself belongs to their step-grandfather—he has moved to a neighboring town, but has allowed the girls to stay here and helps out with the bills. They describe the older neighbors as friendly and their specific block as still “basically family,” with several generations crowded together in each house. But the larger neighborhood has changed dramatically in recent years from stable working-class Latinos, like their step-grandfather (now retired but for many years a school janitor), to younger people heavily involved in drugs and gangs.

Beyond this relatively peaceful block, the wider neighborhood is cleaved by invisible, deadly borders into the territories of rival cholo gangs. Lola begins to sketch a map for us:

The gang on this street is the 6th Street gang, even though this is 4th Street. (They really don't know how to count, so you know how well educated they are!) Then there's another 6th Street gang that is really on 6th Street, but they're not friends with the gang here. Then there's a gang on 7th Street, which are friends with 6th. Then this whole section across Bristol over to Fairview, from 1st to 17th, that's another gang.

You don't really see them, but you know they're around. They're really dangerous. They think “this is our 'hood,” so whenever someone walks by they're like, “Where you from?” Yesterday we were in another neighborhood, which was scary. We know who the gang members are around here. When you go into another neighborhood, they don't know you, so they eye you down.

They had gone to that other neighborhood to attend a vigil for a relative who had been shot to death the previous evening.

Sofia: His best friend shot him in the head twice—his friend that he grew up with.

Lola: He had joined a gang at a young age. Then he had a son, he grew up, and he tried to do better, and his friends seen him do better.

Sofia: Exactly, so they rejected him and decided to kill him.

Lola: When it got dark, the gang showed up for the vigil. So we had to be careful because they don't know who we are, and they could have shot us. One of them did have a gun, so we had to be careful what we said and what we did. We didn't know what was happening, so we had to walk out of the area fast.

The sisters draw a simple moral: You can't trust anyone, even your best friends.

The girls' neighborhood was not always so dangerous. From a very young age the two sisters were raised by their grandmother and step-grandfather (whom they know as "Grandpa"). Both grandparents had been born in the United States, but neither had graduated from high school. They provided the girls with a loving, stable home at a time when the neighborhood was still a good place to grow up. "We had the normal suburban life," Lola recalls. "It wasn't all about gangs and stuff. My grandma would let us go to the parks and play, and we all had bikes and a swing set. Everything that a little white kid would have, basically. So we had a childhood."

The sisters were very close to their grandparents and remain close to their step-grandfather. Family dinners were regular. Their grandmother "made sure I had braces," recalls Lola. Their step-grandfather rearranged his work schedule so he could pick them up from school, and he helped Sofia with her math homework. Both grandparents encouraged them to do well in school.

Sofia: My grandmother would say “You should do good in school! Did you do your homework?”

Lola: They would sit with us and check our homework.

Sofia: Reward us if we got B+’s or whatever—go the movies or to the mall.

Although the family wasn’t affluent, their step-grandfather made enough money, Lola says, that “we never ever went without anything.” The family always celebrated birthdays and went to the beach, to Sea-World, and to Disneyland three times a year. Lola recalls that their grandparents were “really, really strict,” and raised the girls to have good manners and respect others.

Sofia: She was a tough grandmother.

Lola: If she wasn’t the way that she was with us, I think we’d be one of those ghetto people outside.

Sofia: Exactly!

Interviewer: Did your grandparents talk to you about the kind of person they wanted you to be?

Lola: They never really talked to us about that. They just made us into that person.

Catastrophically, “everything changed once my grandma died,” says Lola. Their step-grandfather continued to provide for the girls, but Lola (then 14) had to become a surrogate mother to Sofia (six). Five years later he moved out of the house, though he continued to support the girls financially. Lola explains, “I was 19 when he moved out. It was hard! My sister was in fifth grade, so it was hard learning how to cook and wash when I never had to do that stuff. I didn’t have a choice. We really only had each other and my grandpa.”

Lola had hoped to attend a better high school some distance away, but because of her unexpected childrearing responsibilities, she had to attend nearby Santa Ana High. Even there, “I wasn’t really allowed to

do stuff, 'cause I had to take care of her, because my grandpa worked. I had to grow up really fast." Eventually, Lola dropped out of Santa Ana, but she continued to care for Sofia, as these two young women faced the world together bereft of adult guidance.

Behind the story of their grandparents' loving custody lies a darker reality. They had different birth fathers, both drug addicts, and their birth mother was a gang member—in fact, one of the first female gang members in Santa Ana. After leaving the gang, she became a heroin addict and a prostitute. They have an older half-sister, who was raised in foster homes and has never been part of their lives. "Her dad was the one that got my mom into drugs and prostituting," says Lola.

Sofia has virtually no memory of her mother. Lola has somewhat fuller memories, but they're not good. "My mom was in prison most of my life," she says. "I just have memories of my mom being a heroin addict." Like many others of her generation, Lola and Sofia say, their mother "chose the streets." The girls' grandmother eventually called the cops on her daughter, feeling, Lola says, that "she needed to learn." As a result, their mother was imprisoned, and their grandmother took them in. When the girls were ten and two, their mother was released, but she died not long afterward (perhaps from AIDS, though the girls don't say so).

Years later Lola learned from police records about an earlier arrest. "The day after my ninth birthday, she was arrested down the street from here for prostitution. And she never came to see me. She was so close, [but] she chose prostitution and drugs over me."

Sofia has no idea who her father was. Lola's dad lives in Fullerton, but she despises him. "Gang member crackhead!" she spits out, when asked what he does for a living. "He's a douche. He called me a whore last time I saw him because I didn't want to hug him."

Ironically, their parents' status as gang members in Santa Ana continues to protect the girls to some extent from gang harassment. "We were never pressured into doing it [joining a gang] because of who our family was." The example of their mother has taught them never to do drugs or alcohol.

Santa Ana Schools

For Lola and Sofia, education was initially a rewarding experience. Their grandmother arranged for each of them to attend Head Start, and both girls have fond memories of elementary school. “It was really fun,” Lola recalls. “I liked my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Garcia. She was really nice and caring. She was cool.” Sofia recalls her experiences the same way. “The teachers actually cared,” she says. “The schools I went to were good. I really did like school, to be honest with you.” Sofia seems to have been a precocious student—smart, motivated, and selected for a gifted-and-talented program. “She was a weirdo,” Lola says, teasing her. “She liked reading the dictionary.” “I did,” Sofia admits. “I enjoyed reading the dictionary. It was cool.”

Lola says that Santa Ana High was “a total different story,” compared to their previous schools. The girls observe that the Santa Ana High School buildings are not so bad, though they are ringed by a high chain link fence, “Keep Out” signs decorated with gang graffiti, and lurking police cars. It’s the social environment, not the physical plant, that makes Santa Ana High a very different place from Troy High.

Sofia: Going to school every day was very scary. There were kids with guns in the school.

Lola: She [Sofia] was going there when someone was actually murdered.

Sofia: Right across the street. The kid who got murdered was just standing there, and these gangsters came up to him and asked him “Where you from?” He didn’t say anything, so they just shot him and left him there.

Lola: There’s still bullet holes in the signs.

Sofia: The kids will literally spit in the teachers’ faces, start fights, try to kill them. A girl threatened to 1-8-7 me. [“1-8-7” is gangsta slang for “murder.”]

Lola: The worst one for me was a guy in class that was a gang

member, a druggie. One day out of nowhere he was sitting behind me, and he grabbed my hair and pulled me back and said that he would kill me if I didn't give him my money. And then he let me go and just laughed. But he would always talk about how he had a gun in his locker. I don't know how true that was.

Sofia: I felt scared a lot of times when guys in the class would give each other dirty looks and try to be big and bad and start fights. Girls too. They're so bad, fighting with each other for no reason.

"What was your typical day like?" we ask. Both girls respond immediately, finishing one another's sentences.

Seeing lots of fights, people throwing stuff in class, being very disrespectful to the teachers. Kids would tell them off, start arguments, be really rude. It was nasty. Kids took Ecstasy and drank [vodka-]spiked Gatorade in class all the time.

Under these conditions, it is perhaps not surprising that the teachers and administrators seemed to the girls apathetic and unhelpful. Classroom instruction and learning were not priorities. "What were academics like in your school?" we ask.

Lola: There wasn't any.

Sofia: [Laughing] What's "academics"?

Lola: In junior high, when all the stuff was good, the teachers actually cared.

Sofia: In high school teachers don't care.

Lola: The teachers would even say out loud that they get paid to be there.

Sofia: Just to be there. Just to baby-sit.

Lola: Yeah, that they're there just to baby-sit, that they don't care if we learn or not.¹¹

Sofia says that a teacher once allowed her to skip a Saturday detention for talking during class so that she could baby-sit his child. Lola remembers a different kind of negligence. The school, wrongly assuming that Sofia spoke Spanish because she is ethnically Latina, assigned her to a class for native Spanish-speaking students. For an entire year she couldn't follow anything—the classwork, the reading, the homework, or the tests—and simply sat looking out the window. When Lola went to school to point out the mistake, they said that they couldn't change Sofia's placement, and that she would have to stay in that class, but they offered her an additional catch-up class—which met at 6:00 a.m.

Later, acting in effect as Sofia's guardian, Lola asked a math teacher about Sofia's performance in class and suggested that he might give her extra work to do, so she could catch up. His response, she says, was that Sofia was "pathetic," and that he wouldn't give her any extra work "because she wasn't going to do it anyway." Even the school counselors didn't seem to care. "They were there," Lola says, "but they were not there. Her counselor never wanted to help her."

Honors students were a separate, mysterious caste at Santa Ana High from the girls' point of view. "The smart kids stay to themselves," Lola says. "The ones in honors actually get the good teachers." Lacking help from counselors or parents or simply adult savvy, they have no idea how honors students are selected. When pressed to explain, Lola can only respond, "If you're smart"—and then observes that even being smart didn't help Sofia get into honors classes. "The thing is," she says, "in junior high and elementary school, she was really smart. She was a good student, and then once high school hit, it was a total different story." Taking the SATs, too, was something only for the honors students. "Only the smart kids knew about that," Lola says. "The only reason I knew about that was because some of my friends were doing it. Other than that, nobody talked about it."

While at Santa Ana, neither Lola nor Sofia ever participated in any extracurricular or other organized activities. Lola tried joining a reading club, but the teacher in charge refused to allow her in, saying her reading

level wasn't good enough. Sofia wanted to play on the volleyball team, but was refused, because she was not an A or B student.

When Sofia fell behind at Santa Ana, she sought help in vain from her teachers and counselors. "You guys are no help. Literally no help. Why do you guys have me in here?" she protested. Sofia's step-grandfather was so angry with the school administrators (and perhaps intimidated by them) that Lola tried to intervene. (He tells us that when he was growing up here in the 1950s, all the parents were involved in the schools, but now they are completely uninterested. "They would rather let others do it, but then no one gets involved.") She asked to have her sister transferred to continuation school, an alternative program for kids who are not making adequate progress in a regular high school. The school refused. "They said they couldn't do anything about it," Lola says. "They basically just wanted her money, since a school gets paid for each student. They didn't care that she was going to fail."

The sisters appealed to the school district, however—and prevailed. Sofia entered the continuation program in her junior year, and it served her well. The girls explain that typically "the kids at the continuation school are the kids that the schools don't want—the ones that have ankle bracelets—and most of them don't want to be there." Sofia, however, "was one of the lucky ones that actually did the work."

Sofia did most of her studying at home, though she checked in at the school once or twice a week. In essence, she pursued a kind of guided independent study, and succeeded at it because she no longer had the distractions and bullying she had encountered at Santa Ana High, and because the staff of the continuation school turned out to be surprisingly conscientious. "Her teacher was amazing," Lola says. "She actually took her time and helped her out." Sofia seconds that. "Yeah, dude, she was awesome," she says. "And they gave me books and packets." Not only that, when Sofia encountered difficulties in math, the school arranged for her to be tutored. Lola was shocked: "They actually supplied the tutor."

Even with minimal structure Sofia flourished in this new setting. With encouragement from the continuation staff and no doubt helped

by her native wit and motivation, she passed the “KC” [that is, the CAHSEE, or California High School Exit Examination]. A college counselor at the continuation school then helped her to enroll in a local community college, and, miraculously, Sofia found financial support. For some years the sisters had volunteered at a hospital with AIDS patients. According to the sisters, one of the major donors to the program heard about Sofia’s story and offered to pay for her community college and books, removing all financial barriers to her postsecondary education.

Sofia is getting decent grades in community college and wants to become a teacher. But this story does not yet have a fairy-tale ending. Lola and Sofia are navigating the educational system on their own, without any steady guidance from the schools or support from their family. Without the institutional savvy that kids from more comfortable backgrounds have, things can seem very opaque to them. Sofia is confused, for example, about whether her college has a teacher-training program, or even whether it operates with a two-year or four-year curriculum. Lola reports that Sofia’s school is overenrolled, which means she has been unable to register for the classes that she needs and is enrolled in a single class that she doesn’t need. She is filling her time by working the counter at Hot-Dog-on-a-Stick, still hoping that somehow she will eventually make it through community college.

That’s more than Lola hopes for herself. Worn down and performing badly because of the demands of raising Sofia, she dropped out of Santa Ana High just before the end of her junior year. She made that decision after a teacher advised her that she could get a GED through a community college—but that advice proved wrong. Eventually, she did get the degree, but the whole experience so soured her on education that she gave up on going to college. She now has a job that she hates, at a cheap chain clothing store, and is investing her hopes in Sofia. “I want her to be better than my family,” she says. “No one’s done anything.”

Sofia shares that feeling. “Yeah,” she says, “no one’s done anything in our family. We have no people going in the Marines; we have no people going to the Army. We have no people graduated from university; no people becoming doctors or cops or anything. They’re all losers.”

Sofia wants to rise above that. When asked what she wants to do, she has a simple answer. “Make something out of myself,” she says. “Yeah.”

Clara and the Other Latino Orange County

Because Clara is professionally involved with low-income Latino kids from Santa Ana, she has an unusual perspective on the differences between her own children’s educational experience and the experience of kids in Santa Ana. Let her summarize the contrast.

If you go to downtown Santa Ana, the mostly Hispanic, low-income areas, they don’t have the resources. A lot of these kids come from homes where they’re monolingual Spanish, and the parents probably have fourth- or fifth-grade level education, if that. There’s a small percentage of those students whose parents are not educated—like my husband and I were with our own parents—and do make it, but it’s too small of a percentage, so small! But 70, 80 percent don’t make it. They end up going to the military or trade schools, or they end up in junior colleges. And then they drop out because they get discouraged, because they need the money to be able to survive.

[Comparing parental contributions to the schools], you find out where the discrepancy is, unfortunately, because financially in Santa Ana those parents are working just to pay their rent and their utilities. They really can’t afford to donate money. They don’t have the same opportunities that we did. They can’t find jobs, and they live very badly. They share rooms, a house with three or four families.

The teachers in these areas are basically managing the students because of their behavior, versus [working on] academics. These children are disruptive in class, they’re truant, and they’re on drugs, or there’s violence. So yeah, academics? Are you kidding me? They’d rather go get high.

It’s a challenge for the teachers, because a lot of these students are not adequately prepared for high school. They are reading at the third- or fourth-grade level, and [yet] they get passed on to high

school, so they lack the studying and organizational skills and the commitment and the sense of ownership of responsibility to do well academically. I don't think it's just the students. It's a combination of things. The parents don't speak English, so they can't help the kids with their homework.

It's very tough for those kids, because the counselors fail to catch kids who are struggling. I asked a vice principal who's a client of mine, "Why are you promoting these kids who failed several classes? You're setting them up to fail, and of course, they're going to drop out. Who would want to go to school, if you're failing your classes and you don't feel you're adequate?" Of course, their self-esteem is going to be lowered, and that's when they get depressed, because they don't feel socially accepted or academically accepted. These are the kids that fall behind, and they go to continuation school.

They [the school counselors] probably get them in [to continuation school] to be able to say that they finished school. But these students are by far remedial students. They are probably not below average in terms of IQ. I think it's just for environmental reasons and economic reasons that these children are falling through the cracks. These kids are going to do poorly in their whole life, not just academically.

Though Clara herself is a Latina "Tiger Mom," deeply committed to enhancing her own children's opportunities, she is also sensitive to the plight of a very different category of Latino young people in Orange County, those from poor homes and dangerous neighborhoods. Unlike many affluent Americans today, but like affluent Americans a half century ago, she thinks of kids from places like Santa Ana as "our kids."

Troy and Santa Ana represent to some extent the extremes of American high schools, not the average.¹² The stark comparison between them heightens our awareness of the many contrasting features of schools in rich and poor communities today, but we can get a more accurate sense of how different such schools really are across America by examining systematic, nationwide evidence.

Schools: Whom You Go to School with Matters

The central question of this chapter is this: Do schools in America today tend to *widen* the growing gaps between have and have-not kids, do they *reduce* those gaps, or do they have little effect either way? Isabella and Sofia obviously came from very different family backgrounds and went to very different schools, but did the schools magnify or diminish the differences in where they are now? More subtly, if schools are somehow implicated in class divergence, are they *causes* of class divergence or merely *sites* of class divergence? What can the myriad empirical studies of schooling in contemporary America teach us about the various ways in which schools might perpetuate, narrow, or exacerbate class differences? Answering such questions turns out to be tricky but ultimately revealing.

The American public educational system was created to give all kids, regardless of their family origins, a chance to improve their lot in life. The system has been substantially expanded and transformed three times during the past two centuries, and each time a core objective was leveling the playing field.

- The Common School movement of the 1840s and 1850s eventually led to near-universal free public elementary education. “Education, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men,” proclaimed Horace Mann, the first great educational reformer in America and the father of the Common School movement.¹³
- The comprehensive High School movement, from 1910 to 1940, eventually led to near-universal public secondary education. Economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, leading analysts of this development, characterize it as the seminal force behind both economic growth and socioeconomic equality in America during the twentieth century.¹⁴
- The Land-Grant College movement, beginning with the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, followed by the G.I. Bill during the

1940s and 1950s, provided the basis for mass higher education in America. The purpose of the Morrill Acts is often described as “the democratization of higher education”; and the provision of essentially free postsecondary education to nearly 8 million veterans of World War II and the Korean War under the G.I. Bill, most of them draftees from all socioeconomic backgrounds, massively expanded access to colleges and universities.¹⁵

These movements had other goals beyond equal opportunity (notably, improving the nation’s economic productivity and undergirding democratic citizenship).¹⁶ Moreover, despite their egalitarian claims these pre–Civil Rights era reforms largely excluded African Americans. That said, most of these educational reformers would have been disappointed if schools did not tend to narrow class gaps among the students, and virtually all would have been appalled if schools actually widened those gaps.

On the other hand, the experiences of Isabella, Lola, and Sofia seem to belie such egalitarian aspirations. So what does the available evidence tell us about social class and schools in America today?

Let’s begin with test scores and K–12 education. In a landmark study, the Stanford sociologist Sean Reardon demonstrated a widening class gap in both math and reading test scores among American kids in recent decades. Indeed, Reardon’s charts mirror the scissors graphs of other measures that animate the pages of this book. He summarizes his key finding succinctly: “The achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families is roughly 30–40 percent larger among children born in 2001 than among those born twenty-five years earlier.”¹⁷

That gap corresponds, roughly speaking, to the high-income kids getting several more years of schooling than their low-income counterparts. Moreover, this class gap has been growing *within* each racial group, while the gaps *between* racial groups have been narrowing (the same pattern we discovered earlier in this inquiry for other measures,

among them nonmarital births). By the opening of the twenty-first century, the class gap among students entering kindergarten was two to three times greater than the racial gap.

Reardon's distressing discovery jibes almost perfectly with much other research on class trends in child development, including non-cognitive measures. His finding is of fundamental importance, because academic achievement, as measured by test scores, is a dominant contributor to class disparities in later outcomes, such as college graduation, incarceration, and adult earnings.¹⁸ Strikingly, Reardon's analysis also suggests that schools themselves aren't creating the opportunity gap: the gap is already large by the time children enter kindergarten and, he reports, does not grow appreciably as children progress through school. Reviewing the evidence, James Heckman writes, "The gaps in cognitive achievement by level of maternal education that we observe at age eighteen—powerful predictors of who goes to college and who does not—are mostly present at age six, when children enter school. Schooling—unequal as it is in America—plays only a minor role in alleviating or creating test score gaps."¹⁹

Other findings strengthen the view that schools themselves do not do much to exacerbate the opportunity gap. Among elementary-age children, for example, test score gaps expand faster during the summer, while kids are out of school, and then stabilize when the kids go back to school in the fall. Although school quality and resources are unequal between top and bottom socioeconomic schools, once we account for nonschool factors (such as family structure, economic insecurity, parental engagement, and even TV watching), school quality and school resources themselves seem to contribute relatively little to class gaps in test scores and other measures of cognitive and socioemotional skills.²⁰

Our stories from Bend, Atlanta, and Orange County included frequent examples of school officials reaching out to help poor kids and level the playing field. Recall Joe's elementary school teacher, who used her lunch break to teach him to read; Clara's and Francisco's teachers who took the twins to Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm; the

counselor in Kayla's school who unexpectedly arranged for her braces, and the school librarian who helped her get financial aid; Michelle's special educators, who spotted and helped her to surmount her learning disabilities; Lola's first-grade teacher, Mrs. Garcia, simultaneously "caring" and "cool," and the "awesome" staff of her continuation school, who enabled her to get through high school and into college. On the other hand, few of the staff at Santa Ana High seemed to reach out to help poor kids.

Virtually all this evidence—quantitative and qualitative—might seem to exonerate schools from any responsibility for the widening class gap, and suggests that schools might be helping to level the playing field, just as America's educational reformers have hoped. But—and it is a big "but"—there's no denying that rich and poor kids in this country attend vastly different schools nowadays, which seems hard to square with the notion that schools are innocent bystanders in the growing youth class gap. Our comparison of Troy High School and Santa Ana High School illustrates this kind of class-based segregation all too vividly. And it matters greatly: quantitative studies have consistently found exceptionally wide differences in academic outcomes between schools attended by affluent kids and schools attended by their impoverished counterparts.

So what's going on?

A first, fundamental fact is residential sorting. As we have seen in Port Clinton, Bend, Atlanta, and Orange County, rich and poor Americans are increasingly living in separate neighborhoods.²¹ Although not all kids attend schools based on their parents' residence, most still do. Thus, residential sorting by income over the last 30 to 40 years has shunted high-income and low-income students into separate schools.²²

Ironically, school quality itself may help explain the increased residential segregation, because most parents now pay close attention to it when deciding where to live. This is true even of parents who have only modest educations themselves, as we saw in the case of Stephanie, our working-class mom in Atlanta. However, well-educated parents of all ethnic backgrounds now go to extraordinary efforts to identify the best

schools for their kids and to move into those districts, as the stories of Simone in Atlanta and Clara in Orange County reveal. Both Simone and Clara started comparison shopping for schools when their kids were preschoolers, and both chose their current homes specifically so that their kids could attend high-quality high schools.

Upper-class parents generally have better information about school quality than lower-class parents²³ and are better able to afford homes in the right neighborhoods. Jonathan Rothwell of the Brookings Institution found that houses near a high-scoring public school cost more than \$200,000 more than comparable houses near low-scoring schools.²⁴ Other research suggests that when people bid up prices for houses in good school districts, they are really bidding for a district with many affluent, well-educated parents, rather than for the best teacher quality, class size, or per-pupil spending, implying that parents believe that parental inputs are more important than school inputs in determining school quality.²⁵ (When my family moved to the Boston area years ago and sought a community with good schools, my wife used the “braces test”—how many kids in town were wearing braces? It was a reasonable proxy for parenting and income and thus for school quality.) This process clusters advantaged kids with other advantaged kids in one set of schools, like Troy High, and poor kids with other poor kids in another set of schools, like Santa Ana High.

Admirable though it may be for other reasons, “school choice” has had at most a slight impact on the class gap. It does allow an increasing proportion of students (roughly 15 percent) to attend schools chosen by their parents, rather than schools based on their residence. But especially among lower-income families, the choices parents make are often not well informed and are constrained by transportation and child care problems.²⁶ School choice would not likely have made much difference for the lower-class children we’ve focused on in this book, for example, because they lacked savvy parents to help them make better choices.

Regardless of their own family background, kids do better in schools where the other kids come from affluent, educated homes. This pattern appears to be nearly universal across the developed world.²⁷ “The social

composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independent of the student's own social background, than is any other school factor," James Coleman, the first researcher to demonstrate this powerful fact, has written. This generalization applies not only to test scores, graduation, college enrollment, and so forth, but also to adult incomes, even holding constant the effects of a child's own family background and test scores.

That poor kids achieve more in high-income schools is described by Gary Orfield and Susan Eaton as "one of the most consistent findings in research on education." In a few studies, in fact, the correlation of a student's high school learning with her *classmates'* family backgrounds is greater than the correlation with her *own* family background.²⁸

Try this mental experiment: Suppose that Sofia (with her "gifted and talented" designation and her precocious dictionary reading) had magically been transferred to Troy High School, while Isabella had been malevolently assigned to a high school like Santa Ana. It's hard to imagine that their respective achievements would remain unaffected. Indeed, Clara and Ricardo, you'll recall, performed exactly that mental experiment when deciding to move from their old neighborhood in LA to Fullerton. But why does the socioeconomic composition of a school seem to have such a powerful impact on its students?²⁹

The first explanation that occurs to many people, experts and ordinary citizens alike, is school finance: that is, that schools in affluent areas, funded largely by local property taxes, can afford more and better teachers, administrators, programs, and physical plant. In fact, however, school finance is probably not a major contributor to the growth of the class gap. Most researchers have found, for example, that school finances (including spending per pupil, and teacher salaries) are not significant predictors of school performance.³⁰ In the past three decades, moreover, as the class gaps have rapidly widened, local property taxes in many states have funded a smaller and smaller fraction of school budgets, in part because court decisions in those states have mandated equalization of spending across school districts.

Teacher salaries are slightly higher in schools serving affluent

students, but that pattern probably reflects a tendency for teachers with more seniority to migrate away from high-poverty, high-minority schools for nonmonetary reasons.³¹ Moreover, the ratios of teachers and guidance counselors to students are, if anything, more favorable in high-poverty schools.³² In this respect, the comparison of Troy and Santa Ana high schools in Table 4.1 accurately reflects the national pattern: differences in the factors under administrative control seem too small to account for the massive differences in student outcomes.

To be sure, hiring more and better teachers at higher salaries to teach in high-poverty schools would be a very good way to narrow class disparities. The challenges facing teachers and staff in high-poverty schools—indiscipline, language difficulties, inadequate academic preparation, and the myriad problems kids bring in from outside school, all illustrated at Santa Ana—are so great that more investment is required to level the playing field for the kids. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that the growing performance gap between low-income schools and high-income schools can be attributed to bias in the allocation of public resources.

More plausible suspects in our mystery are the things that students collectively bring with them to school, ranging from (on the positive side of the ledger) academic encouragement at home and private funding for “extras” to (on the negative side) crime, drugs, and disorder. These are the very factors that jump out from our paired portraits of Santa Ana and Troy.³³ Whom you go to school with matters a lot.

First, kids from affluent, educated homes bring their parents with them to school. Virtually all studies show that affluent, more educated parents are more likely than poor, less educated parents to involve themselves at their kids’ schools. Our stories vividly illustrate this fact. “We ask more questions in a week than my parents probably asked in four years through high school,” Earl said; Simone was a perennial PTA leader in both New Jersey and Atlanta; and Clara not only volunteered in class but also made a point of getting to know the school office staff. Our less affluent parents also tried to engage with their kids’ schools,

but their efforts were hampered by work obligations (Stephanie, in Atlanta), by cultural barriers (Lola's step-grandfather, in Santa Ana), and by their own educational limits (Joe, in Bend). In most cases the growing class gap in parental engagement is due less to lack of motivation than to economic and cultural obstacles, though Lola's step-grandfather suggests that less affluent parents have become more apathetic in recent years. Nevertheless, compared to low-income schools, schools in affluent areas are characterized by greater engagement and support from parents.

This fact has all sorts of consequences. Many studies have shown that parental engagement—everything from asking about homework to attending PTA meetings—is associated with higher academic performance, better socioemotional skills, and other facets of student behavior, such as less use of drugs and alcohol. As educational researchers Anne Henderson and Nancy Berla have put it, summarizing the trends in such studies, “When parents are involved at school, their children go further in school, and the schools they go to are better.”³⁴

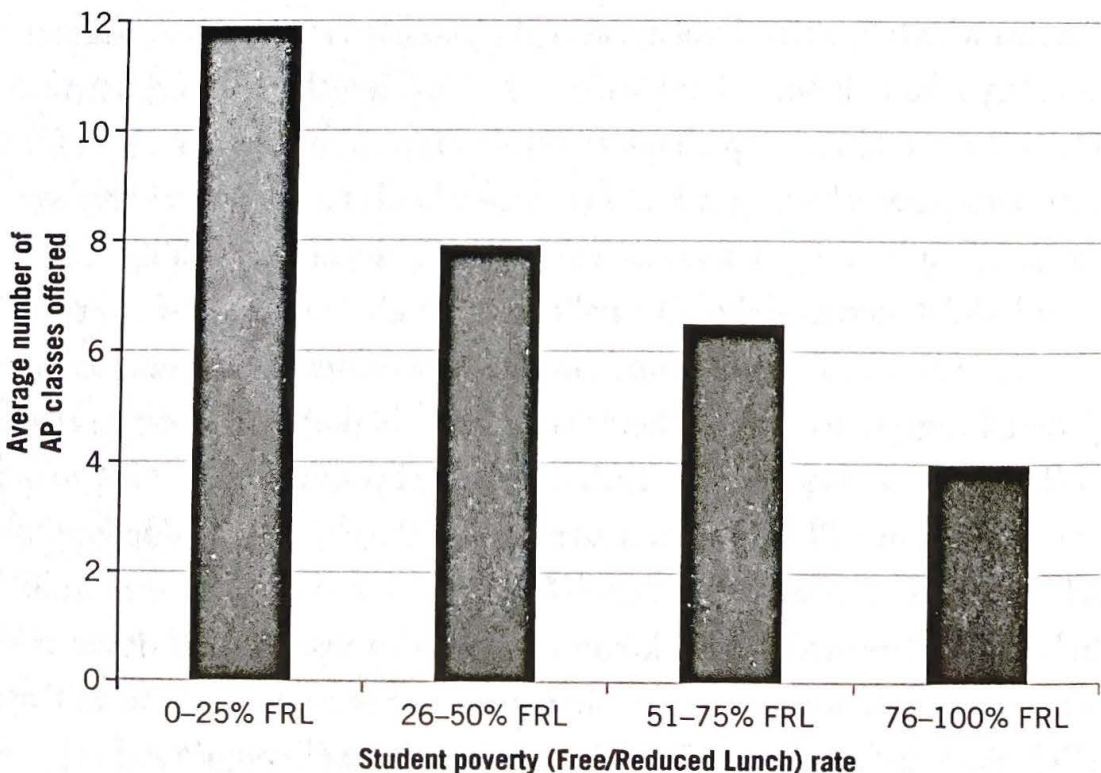
Moving from correlation to causal certainty is more complicated. Parents who frequent school are also likely to have read to their children as infants, so is it the school visits or the reading that really mattered? Or is the causal arrow perhaps reversed, running from student performance to parental engagement? (Visiting school is a more attractive way to spend an evening if the teachers are likely to say nice things about your kids.) Questions about causality are not easy to answer definitively without controlled experiments, but most researchers are persuaded that parental engagement with schools encourages higher performance, especially among socioeconomically disadvantaged youth.

Kids from affluent homes also bring their parents' affluence to school. Anecdotally, “para-school funding” (parental and community fund-raising) provides a stark contrast between upscale and downscale schools. Such funding, we saw, allows for a richer menu of extras at Troy High than at Santa Ana High. At a more extreme level, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, PTAs at several public schools raise nearly

\$1 million annually to support school activities, earning the schools the label “public privates,” and in Hillsborough, California, the annual take from the parent-funded foundation is \$3.45 million, which supplements the school budget by 17 percent. Nationwide evidence to document these patterns is lacking so far, but the examples are striking.³⁵

Parents in upscale communities also demand a more academically rigorous curriculum, which in turn helps produce more learning, fewer dropouts, and more college entrants.³⁶ For example, Figure 4.1, based on a 2011 survey of most public high schools in America, shows that low-poverty schools (roughly speaking, the top quartile of schools, in terms of parental income) offer three times as many AP classes as their high-poverty counterparts.³⁷ Once again, we can see the national pattern mirrored in the contrast between Santa Ana and Troy: all the kids at Troy are nerds, Clara told us, whereas the only thing Sofia had to say about academics at Santa Ana was to snicker, “What’s academics?”

Figure 4.1: High-poverty high schools offer fewer Advanced Placement classes



Source: Civil Rights Data Collection, U.S. Department of Education, 2009–10 school year.

Peer pressure, too, plays a powerful role in fostering high academic performance. The influence of peers, which tends to peak at ages 15–18, has been shown on teens' academic achievement, educational aspirations, college going, misbehavior, drug use, truancy, and depression, as well as consumer behavior. As peers transmit social norms, educational values, and even academic skills, peers at high-income schools thus serve as educational catalysts for one another. High standards and aspirations tend to be contagious—as do low standards and aspirations.³⁸ Peer pressure helps explain the correlation between a school's socioeconomic composition and student performance.³⁹

But where do the affluent kids' standards and aspirations come from? Isabella gave us a clear answer—the parents. “[My parents] didn't try to put a lot of pressure on me, [but] a lot of people have got pressure on them from home. . . . [When] kids would not do as well as they had wanted to do on a test, they wouldn't want to go home, because their parents would be waiting there to say, ‘Okay, let me see your score. What's wrong?’”

The net result in a school with lots of kids from well-educated, academically ambitious homes is that peer pressure—what Isabella and her classmates experience as “stress” and “competition”—amplifies the collective effects of the achievement motivation from their homes. Conversely, in a school like Santa Ana the peer environment dampens whatever academic aspirations any individual student might bring from home.

So, on average, what kids from affluent homes and neighborhoods bring to school tends to encourage higher achievement among all students at those schools. But the opposite is also true: the disorder and violence that kids from impoverished homes and neighborhoods tend to bring to their schools discourages achievement for all students at those schools. This is what we saw happening at Santa Ana High, with students whispering threats of mayhem in the classroom, and teachers confining themselves to baby-sitting.

High-poverty schools are characterized by higher rates of delinquency, truancy, disorder, and transience than low-poverty schools, and

lower rates of English proficiency, because all of those characteristics are concentrated in poor communities.⁴⁰ As we witnessed in Santa Ana High, all those characteristics adversely affect *all* the students in such schools, whether or not they personally are delinquent, truant, disorderly, transient, or non-English-speaking. One careful study, for example, found that the presence in a classroom of kids who had been exposed to domestic violence reduced *other* kids' achievement, especially in high-poverty schools.⁴¹

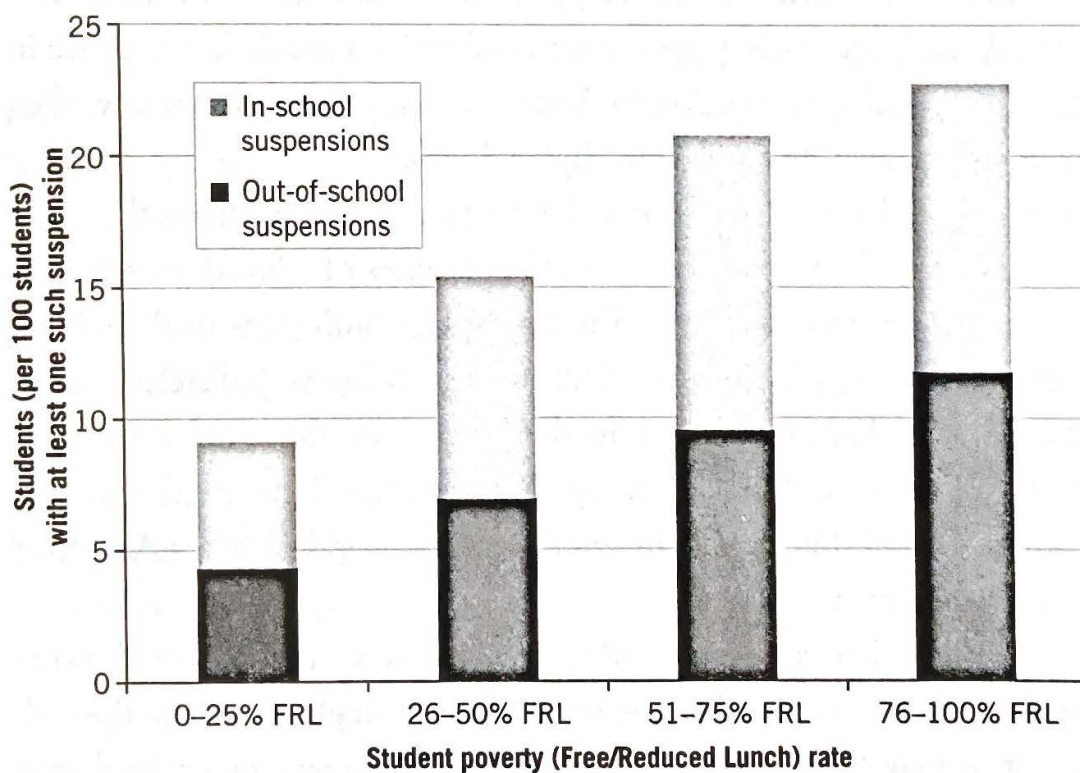
Here, too, the class gap seems to have grown in recent years, yet again creating the familiar scissors effect. Between 1995 and 2005, victimizations at school declined by nearly 60 percent in suburban schools but by only 43 percent in urban schools. Not surprisingly, too, graduation rates are much lower in high schools with more crime-prone students, because of their impact on class climate and on teacher commitment. "Despite aggregate declines in school crime and fear," criminologists David Kirk and Robert Sampson conclude, "inequality by race and social class in educational experiences has likely increased because declines have been relatively more concentrated in suburban and private schools."⁴²

Gangs, largely an urban phenomenon, contribute significantly to school crime and fear. Roughly one quarter of urban students report a gang presence at their high schools, and about one quarter of urban schools report 20 or more violent incidents annually.⁴³ Most of those incidents are not reported to police, but, as Figure 4.2 shows, suspensions are two and a half times more common in high-poverty high schools than in low-poverty high schools. We saw an extreme version of this disparity when (in Table 4.1) we compared the rates of suspension at Troy High and Santa Ana High. An even greater concentration of disciplinary problems in high-poverty schools is found among elementary and middle schools, though suspensions are rarer in the earlier grades.⁴⁴

The result of this concatenation of disadvantage, other researchers have found, is that "high-poverty classrooms have four times the concentrations of academic, attention, and behavioral problems as low-poverty

classrooms.”⁴⁵ This is, of course, precisely the school climate that Sofia and Lola described for us in such harrowing detail: a climate that disrupts class management, student learning, and teacher morale, and lowers the odds that teachers with other options will choose to work or stay in such schools.

Figure 4.2: High-poverty high schools have more disciplinary problems



Source: Civil Rights Data Collection, U.S. Department of Education, 2009–10 school year.

A recent study of California high school teachers' daily classroom routines made vivid just how different the learning environments are in high-poverty and low-poverty schools.⁴⁶ Stressful conditions from outside school are much more likely to intrude into the classroom in high-poverty schools. Every one of ten such “stressors” is two or three times more common in high-poverty schools than in their low-poverty counterparts—student hunger, unstable housing, and economic problems; lack of medical and dental care; caring for family members and

other family and immigration issues; community violence and safety concerns. One consequence is that even though the nominal number of instructional hours doesn't differ between high-poverty and low-poverty schools, over the course of the average week teachers in high-poverty schools spend roughly three and one half fewer hours in actual instruction, and over the course of the academic year high-poverty schools lose almost two weeks more to teacher absences, emergency lockdowns, and other challenges concentrated in such schools. Formally, high-poverty and low-poverty schools may be given the same resources, but the ecological challenges facing the former render them much less effective in providing quality instruction to their students, precisely as we saw when comparing Santa Ana and Troy High Schools.

Sofia and Lola describe the classroom atmosphere from the point of view of students, but they also offer glimpses of what the teachers at Santa Ana have to confront. "There were kids with guns in the school, lots of fights, people throwing stuff in class, being very disrespectful to the teachers. Kids would spit in their faces, tell them off, start arguments, be really rude. It was nasty." We were unable to speak with any Santa Ana staff, but we can imagine what the world of Santa Ana must look like to them.

Suppose that you were a bright, optimistic young teacher showing up each day to work in this war zone. Idealism might carry you through a year or two, but if you had an opportunity to move to a school with less mayhem and more students eager to learn, you'd jump at the chance. So faculty turnover would be higher, with more rookie teachers every year. Moreover, many of the teachers who remained would be timeservers: inured to turmoil, content to baby-sit, "paid to be there," cynical even about helping well-meaning students, dismissing them as "pathetic," lazily assuming that all Latinos speak Spanish.

Sadly, national data precisely confirm this picture. Better teachers, who can have a substantial effect on student success in later life, are disproportionately found in upper-income, high-performance schools, whereas more transient, less capable teachers are disproportionately

found in lower-income, low-performance schools. This pattern is probably due less to district assignment of teachers and more to teacher flight. In short, poor teacher morale and higher turnover in low-income schools, driven by a climate of disorder and even danger, helps explain why low-income schools produce lower-achieving students, whatever the students' own background and ability.⁴⁷

Two other factors have sometimes been proposed as explanations for the growing class gap in American schools, but the evidence suggests that they play only minor roles, if any.

The first is tracking: the practice of separating students into college-prep and non-college-prep tracks, which for decades was common and tended to provide a modest edge to kids from more educated homes. During the period in which the opportunity gap has widened, however, access to the college-prep track among kids from less privileged backgrounds has increased. Tracking continues to provide a slight advantage to upper-class kids, but it can't account for the substantial increase in the overall opportunity gap.⁴⁸ (To be sure, as Figure 4.1 shows, schools serving poor students offer fewer AP courses, with important consequences for the educational opportunities in such schools.)

Private schools are a second factor that is probably not so important a contributor to the growing opportunity gap as many people think. During the past several decades, the percentage of high school students in private schools has dropped from just over 10 percent to just under 8 percent. Kids from college-educated homes are somewhat more likely (roughly 10 percent) to attend religious or nonsectarian private schools, or to be home-schooled, than kids from high-school-educated homes (roughly 5 percent), but that gap has not changed. Private schools may give a modest edge to affluent students, but that edge has apparently not grown during the years in which the opportunity and achievement gaps have widened sharply.⁴⁹

Extracurricular Activities

School-based extracurricular activities emerged roughly a century ago, as part of the same wave of progressive educational reform that produced the High School movement. The idea was to use extracurriculars to diffuse among all classes what we now call “soft skills”—strong work habits, self-discipline, teamwork, leadership, and a sense of civic engagement. But if we look at participation in extracurricular activities today—in everything from football to band to French club to the student newspaper—we can see yet another dimension of the growing class disparity in America’s educational system.

Involvement in extracurricular activities has been shown repeatedly to have measurably favorable consequences. Consciously or unconsciously, affluent, more educated parents understand this, and as we saw earlier, they are increasingly investing substantial time and money in supporting their kids’ involvement in extracurricular activities. It’s why, in Bend, Earl bought his daughter Lucy a horse and built a barn for it; and why, in Atlanta, Desmond’s mother, Simone, insisted that each of her sons do a sport every season; and why, in Orange County, Isabella’s mother, Clara, paid those speeding tickets to ensure that her kids were extensively involved in extracurriculars. They had time and money that the poorer kids’ families lacked, and they invested those resources in helping their children acquire valuable soft skills through extracurricular activities.

Consistent involvement in extracurricular activities is strongly associated with a variety of positive outcomes during the school years and beyond—even after controlling for family background, cognitive skills, and many other potentially confounding variables. These positive outcomes include higher grade-point averages, lower dropout rates, lower truancy, better work habits, higher educational aspirations, lower delinquency rates, greater self-esteem, more psychological resilience, less risky behavior, more civic engagement (like voting and volunteering), and higher future wages and occupational attainment.⁵⁰ One carefully

controlled study, for example, showed that kids consistently involved in extracurricular activities were 70 percent more likely to go to college than kids who were only episodically involved—and roughly 400 percent more likely than kids who were not at all involved.⁵¹ Another study, which has a special relevance to the students we met in Orange County, found that involvement in extracurricular activities among low-income Latino students (all too rare, as the experiences of Lola and Sofia illustrate) predicts school achievement.⁵²

Leadership in extracurricular activities appears to have even more intense effects: one study found that club and team leaders are more likely to command higher salaries in managerial positions later in life.⁵³ And an intriguing study of students who attended high school in Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1940s even found neurological effects a half century later: students who had participated in extracurricular activities were substantially less likely than those who hadn't to suffer from dementia at the turn of the century, even after adjusting for differences in IQ and educational attainment.⁵⁴ The only negative finding that emerges from the dozens of studies that have been done on the correlates of extracurricular activities is not startling: among young men, participation in sports is often correlated with excessive drinking (but not drug use). Nevertheless, among both men and women, the extracurricular activity most consistently associated with high academic achievement is sports. Jocks turn out to be brainy, too.

To be sure, few of these studies were true experiments, randomly assigning some kids to participate and excluding others, so we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the robust correlation between extracurricular involvement and life success might be due, at least in part, to some unmeasured variable, like innate energy level. On the other hand, a number of studies measure change over time in the same individual, which should eliminate the effects of any enduring personality trait. One clever study found strong effects on college attendance and labor market outcomes after Title IX widened girls' participation in sports, a kind of natural experiment; another study used comparison of siblings to tease

out the causal effects of extracurricular involvement on later earnings; and several experimental studies have confirmed the effects of programs akin to conventional extracurricular activities.⁵⁵

So why do extracurricular activities have such broad implications for a child's future? Many suggestions have been offered: the effects on self-confidence, time use (the "idle hands" theory), positive peer effects, and so on. One important advantage that we shall explore in the next chapter is exposure to caring adults outside the family: coaches and other adult supervisors often serve as valuable mentors, as we saw with Jesse's football coach in Port Clinton and Isabella's track coaches.⁵⁶

But the biggest benefit of extracurricular participation seems to be what the educational reformers who invented this practice hoped it would be: soft skills and character. Presumably it was character, not military skills, that the Duke of Wellington had in mind when he famously exclaimed upon revisiting the playing fields of Eton, "It is here that the battle of Waterloo was won!" Noncognitive skills and habits such as grit, teamwork, leadership, and sociability are unmistakably developed among participants in extracurricular activities.

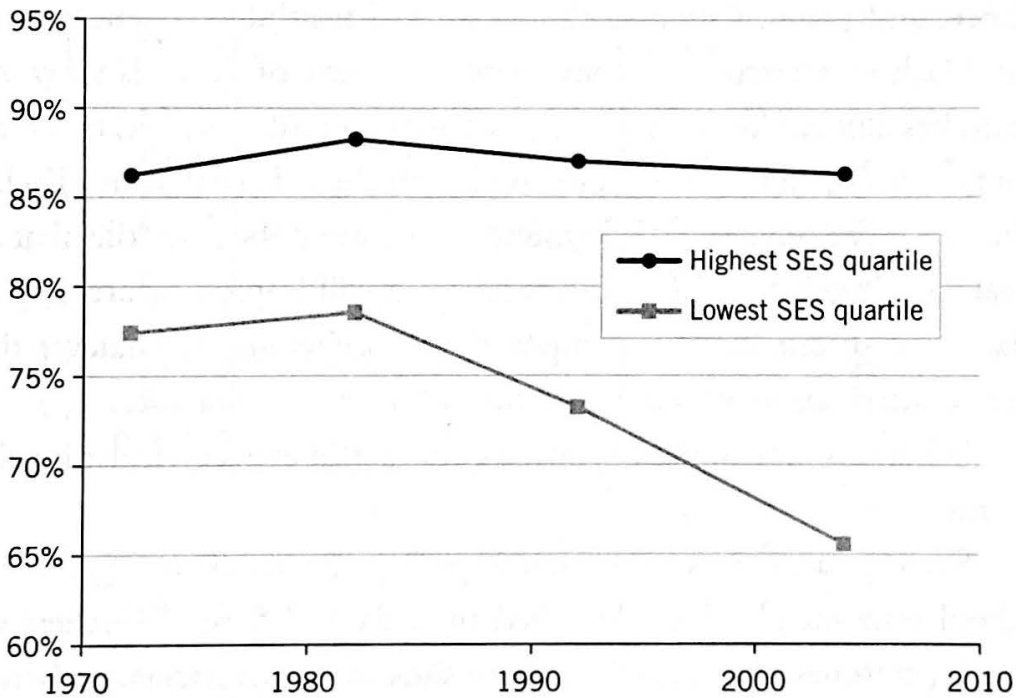
Many researchers believe that soft skills and extracurricular participation are as important as hard skills and formal schooling in explaining educational attainment and earnings ten years later, even controlling for family background. That's because employers increasingly value noncognitive traits, such as work habits and ability to work with others. These noncognitive traits may be even more important for students from more disadvantaged family backgrounds.⁵⁷

To sum things up: extracurricular participation matters for upward mobility. It is thus distressing to learn that every study confirms a substantial class gap in extracurricular participation, especially when it comes to sustained involvement across different types of activity. Poor kids are three times as likely as their nonpoor classmates to participate in *neither* sports *nor* clubs (30 percent to 10 percent), and half as likely to participate in *both* sports *and* clubs (22 percent to 44 percent).⁵⁸

Even more distressing is the fact that extracurricular participation

rates in recent decades display the familiar scissors gap. One study found that during the past 15 years, activity levels in out-of-school clubs and organizations rose among affluent youth and fell among poor youth. From 1997 to 2012, the “extracurricular gap” between poor kids and nonpoor kids aged 6–11 nearly doubled, from 15 to 27 percentage points, while the comparable gap among kids aged 12–17 rose from 19 to 29 percentage points.⁵⁹

Figure 4.3: Growing class gap in participation in school-based extracurriculars, 1972–2004



Sources: National Longitudinal Study of 1972, High School and Beyond (1980), National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Education Longitudinal Study of 2002.

Figure 4.3 draws on national high school surveys in recent years to illustrate the growing gap for extracurricular activities. Similar gaps have opened up for private music, dance, and art lessons, and for leadership positions on athletic teams. Seniors from affluent backgrounds have served as team captains more than twice as often as classmates from poorer backgrounds, a gap that has nearly doubled during the past several decades. This same basic scissors pattern applies to virtually every

type of extracurricular activity, viewed separately. The principal exception is student government, where the gap has closed downward, as rich kids have dropped out even more rapidly than poor kids—a convergent disappearance of practice in self-government that is unfortunate for our democracy.⁶⁰

These charts confirm nationally the class patterns that emerged clearly from our case studies. Recall Andrew's active (if laid-back) membership of the school soccer team, as well as his six years of guitar lessons; Desmond's year-round involvement in school sports, as well as his years of piano lessons; and Isabella's intense involvement in athletics, dance, and piano. Compare those rich and fruitful experiences to the total lack of extracurricular involvement by any of the kids we've met from less affluent homes, despite (for example) futile attempts by Lola to join a reading club and by Sofia to play on the volleyball team. Each of the kids from privileged backgrounds has learned the soft skills that appeal to college admissions officers and that will impress future employers. None of our kids from impoverished backgrounds, whatever their native skills, has benefited from a similar boost.

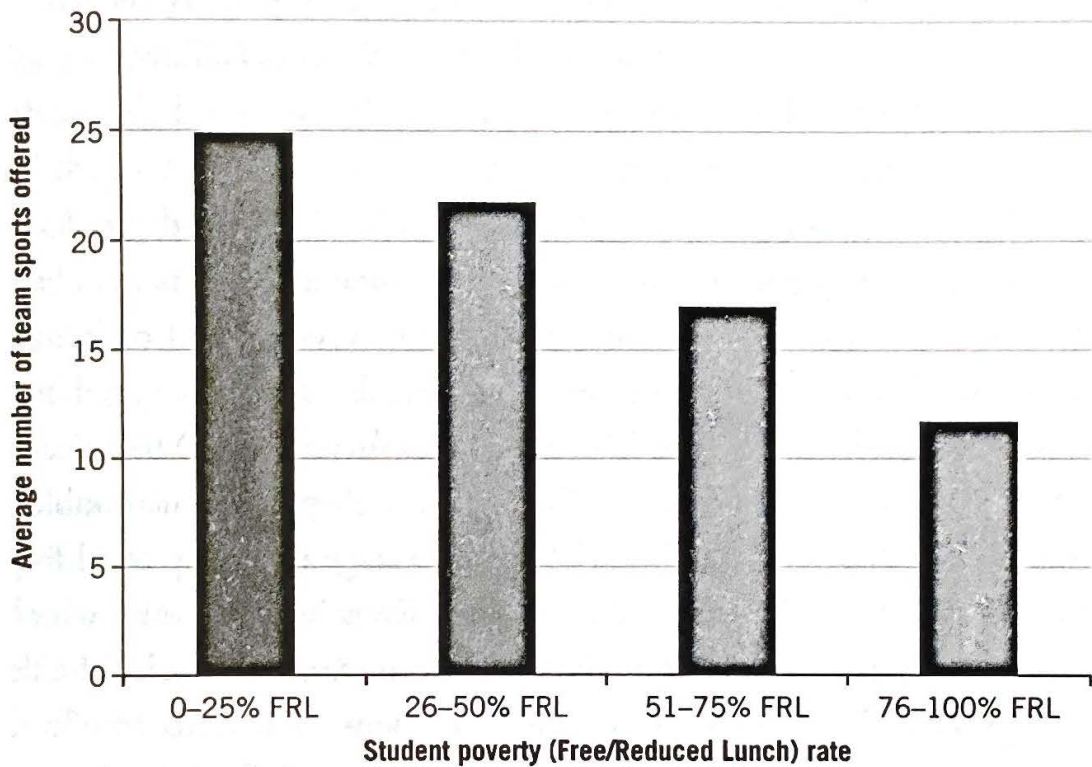
What can explain these growing class gaps in extracurricular involvement?

Some part of the explanation is perhaps active discouragement by school staff members, as described by Lola and Sofia. "Teachers and administrators serve as gatekeepers to slots in extracurricular activities," writes educational commentator Ralph McNeal, "recruiting students they perceive to be talented while restricting others who are disqualified by academic standards."⁶¹ Lack of transportation might also be a factor. More important in the aggregate, however, is the constricted menu of extracurricular opportunities available in high-poverty schools.

For example, Figure 4.4 shows that across America high schools with affluent students offer twice as many team sports as high-poverty schools.⁶² Other studies suggest that this extracurricular gap between affluent and impoverished schools is at least as great for nonsports activities like French club and orchestra. These differences in extracurricular

offerings, in turn, turn out to be an important part of the explanation for the lower academic performance of high-poverty schools.⁶³

Figure 4.4: High-poverty high schools offer fewer team sports



Source: Civil Rights Data Collection, U.S. Department of Education (2009–10 school year).

Fifty years ago, offering opportunities for all kids to take part in extracurricular activities was recognized as an important part of a public school's responsibilities to its students, their parents, and the wider community. No one talked then about soft skills, but voters and school administrators understood that football, chorus, and the debate club taught valuable lessons that should be open to all kids, regardless of their family background. Recall the rich array of extracurricular activities pursued by poor kids in Port Clinton High School in the 1950s.

In our new era of budget belt-tightening, high-stakes testing, and academic "core competencies," however, school boards everywhere have decided that extracurricular activities and soft skills are "frills." Affluent

and impoverished school districts alike have felt this pressure, but given their different constituencies, they have followed different paths. Some poorer districts have simply cut back on extracurricular offerings, as reflected in Figure 4.4. Affluent districts instead have kept (and even expanded) their offerings by drawing on private resources. One such source, as we have seen, is para-school funding by parents and community members. While that approach obviously favors affluent school districts, at least within the schools themselves it does not discriminate between rich and poor students.

More insidious and more widespread has been the rapid proliferation of pay-to-play policies now imposed on students in more than half of American high schools. One nationwide survey in 2010 estimated that team fees and other costs of extracurricular sports averaged between \$300 and \$400 per student. An annual survey of six Midwestern states found that pay-to-play fees for high school sports alone doubled from \$75 in 2007 to \$150 in 2012, while average marching band fees rose from \$85 in 2010 to \$100 in 2013. Even in California, where pay-to-play was found by the courts to be unconstitutional, schools circumvented the ruling by collecting “donations” that were, in effect, mandatory.⁶⁴ Some schools charge distinct fees for different sports; in Painesville, Ohio, cross-country costs \$521, football \$783, and tennis \$933!⁶⁵ In addition, equipment costs (formerly borne by the school, but now typically borne by parents) amount to roughly \$350 per year.⁶⁶

Firm nationwide numbers are still unavailable, but a reasonable estimate nowadays for the total costs of extracurricular participation might be \$400 per student per activity per year, or roughly \$1,600 for two kids in a family participating in two activities each year. For parents in the top quintile of the national income distribution that would amount to about 1–2 percent of their annual income, but for a household in the bottom quintile, the same cost would amount to nearly 10 percent (or more) of their annual income. Given these numbers, the surprise is that any poor kids at all take part in extracurricular activities.

Schools often counter that they waive fees for poor kids, but given

the inevitable stigma attached to the waiver, it is hardly surprising that in 2012, while 60 percent of all kids nationwide who played school sports faced a pay-to-play fee, only 6 percent received a waiver. Prior to the institution of fees, roughly half of all kids, whether from affluent or less affluent backgrounds, were playing sports, but when fees were introduced, *one in every three* sports-playing kids from homes with annual incomes of \$60,000 or less—the national median is about \$62,000, so many of these kids come from solidly middle-class homes—dropped out because of the increased cost, as compared to *one in ten* kids from families with incomes over \$60,000. Within a few decades America's public schools have thrust the burden of extracurricular activity (and the resulting soft skills benefits) onto the family, reversing nearly a century of settled educational policy, with predictable results in terms of equality of access.

Yet even in today's America the provision of extracurricular opportunities through public schools remains less discriminatory than wholly private provision—piano lessons, club soccer, and the like. Children in low-income families are even less likely to participate in organized non-school activities, such as after-school programs, athletic teams, music lessons, and scouts, than they are in school-based activities. Among these nonschool programs, moreover, researchers have found greater class disparities in participation in expensive activities like sports or music lessons than in low-cost programs run by churches or community organizations.⁶⁷ So by providing some working-class kids with activities to which they would otherwise have no access, schools still exert a modest leveling effect on extracurricular participation.

Are school-year jobs another contributor to the growing opportunity gap?⁶⁸ Here experts caution us not to confuse part-time jobs and virtually full-time jobs. Part-time jobs typically have positive benefits in terms of preparation for adult life, and such jobs were in past decades more common among relatively affluent teens. By contrast, virtually full-time jobs have fewer (if any) beneficial long-term consequences and may well interfere with extracurricular activities. The past 40 years have seen a steady decline in school-year employment of all sorts among kids from

all backgrounds, although that decline has been slightly faster among more affluent kids, which has thus slightly closed the class gap. Work, therefore, can't be a major reason for the growing extracurricular gap. Budget cutting and the shifting priorities of American schools are probably the main reasons that extracurricular opportunities (and the soft skills they inculcate) are increasingly the preserve of more affluent young people.

So let's return to the core question in this chapter: Do K–12 schools make the opportunity gap better or make it worse?

The answer is this: the gap is created more by what happens to kids before they get to school, by things that happen outside of school, and by what kids bring (or don't bring) with them to school—some bringing resources and others bringing challenges—than by what schools do to them.⁶⁹ The American public school today is as a kind of echo chamber in which the advantages or disadvantages that children bring with them to school have effects on other kids. The growing class segregation of our neighborhoods and thus of our schools means that middle-class kids like Isabella hear mostly encouraging and beneficial echoes at school, whereas lower-class kids like Lola and Sofia hear mostly discouraging and harmful echoes.

What this means is that schools as *sites* probably widen the class gap. We've seen evidence that schools as *organizations* sometimes modestly contribute to leveling the playing field. For more than a century, school-related extracurricular activities have narrowed the opportunity gap, by providing important opportunities for kids from low-income backgrounds to build the soft skills that are increasingly important for economic and professional success. On the other hand, compared to Port Clinton in the 1950s (when my trombone, trombone lessons, and football coaching and equipment were all provided free of charge by the high school), recent decisions by school boards to withdraw from that historic responsibility are widening the class gap.

The fact that schools as organizations today have a mixed and modest impact on the opportunity gap does not mean that reforms in

schools might not be an important part of the solution to the gap. On the contrary, even if schools didn't cause the growing opportunity gap—and there's little evidence that they have—they might well be a prime place to fix it. Americans concerned about the opportunity gap must not make the all too common mistake of blaming schools for the problem. Instead, we should work with schools to narrow the gap. School is, after all, where the kids are. As I discuss in the final chapter, promising reforms that might raise the performance of schools serving low-income students can be found across the country, raising the prospect that schools, though not a big part of the problem, might be a big part of the solution.⁷⁰

Trends in Educational Attainment

Because education has long been the dominant pathway for upward mobility in America, trends in educational attainment—finishing high school, attending college, and completing college—are a crucial metric for how we are doing, and especially how we are likely to do in the future, as today's students join the workforce. If high school and college are important rungs on the ladder of opportunity between the childhood foundation provided by family and the rewards of adult life, how have kids from various class backgrounds been doing as they climb those rungs in recent years? In each case, it turns out, there is good news and bad news.

HIGH SCHOOL

Throughout most of the twentieth century the fraction of American young people who graduated from high school rose steadily, from 6 percent at the beginning of the century to 80 percent in 1970, the fruits of the High School movement I described earlier.⁷¹ If we include the GED (the national high school equivalency test), that increase continued in the last three decades of the century. Moreover, the earlier class gap in high school diplomas (including GEDs) tended to close in

those decades, as kids from less privileged backgrounds caught up. Even though a gap remains—virtually all kids from the top quartile of socioeconomic status nowadays graduate from high school, whereas more than a quarter of kids from the bottom quartile don't—so far the news about trends seems encouraging.

But a closer look at the trends suggests some bad news, too.

First, most of the apparent improvement among kids from less privileged backgrounds in the years after 1970 was attributable to a rapid increase in GED credentials. In fact, by 2011 the GED accounted for 12 percent of all high school credentials issued, and a disproportionate number of those GEDs were issued to kids from poorer backgrounds, like Lola. Furthermore, much recent research has confirmed that the GED does not have the same value as a regular high school degree, either in terms of continuing on to college or in the labor market. Indeed, some research suggests that the GED adds very little compared to dropping out of high school and getting no degree at all. Many GED recipients say that their ultimate objective is to get a college degree, but only a tiny fraction ever do. In that sense, the closing of the class gap in terms of high school graduation during the past several decades is mostly an illusion.⁷²

Second, although the value of a regular high school degree (not counting GEDs) relative to simply dropping out has remained more or less constant over these years, the value of a high school degree relative to a college degree has declined sharply, because the “college premium” has grown rapidly. In terms of average wages, a college degree was worth 50 percent more than a regular high school degree in 1980, but by 2008 the college degree was worth 95 percent more.⁷³ In that sense, the educational gains of kids from poor backgrounds have been doubly illusory. They've been struggling to catch up on a down escalator.

COLLEGE

During recent decades, college preparedness (in terms of academic achievement) and college entry have risen for students from all

socioeconomic backgrounds. However, a substantial class gap in college enrollment persists, though whether that gap has remained constant or increased is unclear.⁷⁴ The economists Martha Bailey and Susan Dynarski compared kids who would have entered college around 1980 with their counterparts about 20 years later. In the earlier cohort, 58 percent of kids from the most affluent quintile of the income distribution entered college, compared to 19 percent of kids from the poorest quintile. By the end of the century, those figures were 80 percent and 29 percent, respectively.

While college going for poorer kids grew faster, because the richer kids began at a much higher level of college entrance, the absolute gap between the two groups expanded from 39 percentage points to 51 percentage points. A detailed examination of this growing gap identifies many of the same causal factors that we have already discussed—academic preparation in elementary and high school, family and peer support—and others that we shall explore in the next chapter, especially support from mentors and the wider community.⁷⁵

But even if we count these changes in advancement to postsecondary education as good news, we must note some bad news.

First, growing access by poor kids to college does not mean growing access to selective colleges and universities. Increasingly, poor kids who go on to college are concentrated in community colleges—14 percent of poor kids in college in 1972 were in community colleges, compared to 32 percent in 2004. Community colleges can play a valuable role as a ladder out of poverty, of course. They represent hope for disadvantaged kids, as they do for Kayla in Bend, Michelle and Lauren in Atlanta, and Sofia in Orange County. In the concluding chapter we shall consider the contribution that community colleges might make to narrowing the opportunity gap.

On the other hand, for most kids, community colleges are not really a rung on a taller ladder, but the end of the line, educationally speaking. When students enter a community college, 81 percent say they plan to get a four-year degree, but only 12 percent actually do.⁷⁶ So counting a

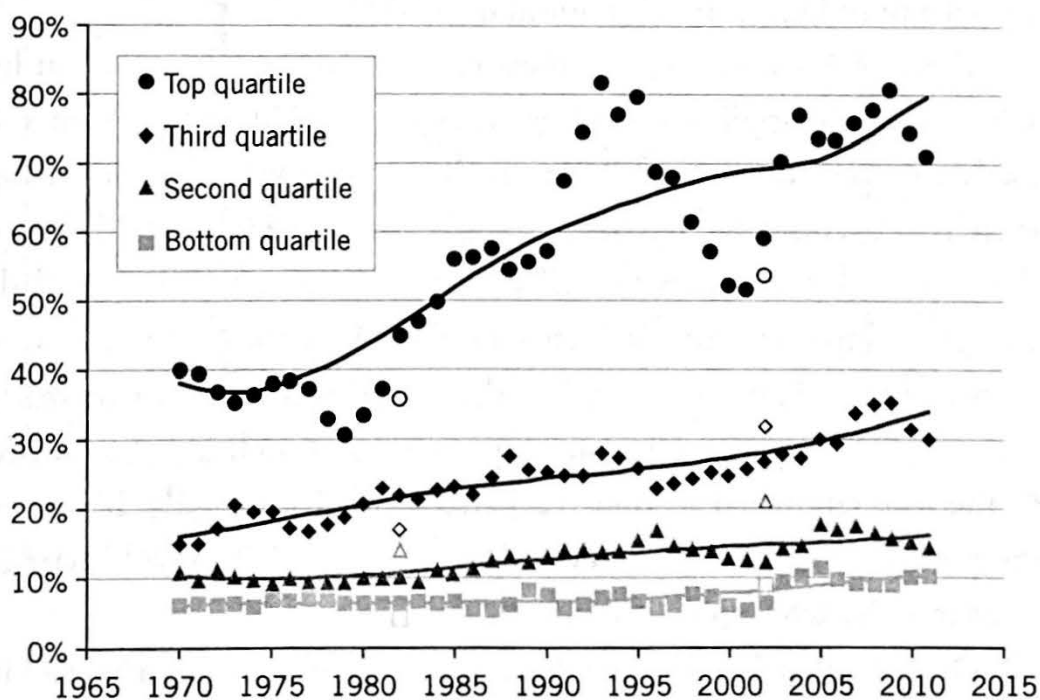
community college as equivalent to a four-year institution (which our “good news” on college entry did) is misleading.

In terms of entry into more selective institutions, which for better or worse offer the best prospects for success in America, the class gap has actually widened in recent years. The fraction of kids from the bottom quartile of the income distribution who ended up at a selective college or university rose from 4 percent in 1972 to 5 percent three decades later, but for kids from the top quartile, the equivalent figures were 26 percent and 36 percent. By 2004, in the nation’s “most competitive” colleges and universities—such as Emory, West Point, Boston College, and USC—kids from the top quartile of the socioeconomic scale outnumbered kids from the bottom quartile by about 14 to one.⁷⁷ Just as with high school degrees, even though young people from less privileged backgrounds are doing somewhat better now than kids from similar backgrounds did several decades ago, kids from privileged backgrounds are lengthening their lead.

That’s bad enough, but there’s worse news: much of the recent growth in enrollment in postsecondary institutions by low-income students has been concentrated in the rapidly expanding for-profit sector, in such institutions as the University of Phoenix and Kaplan. In 2013 this sector attracted 13 percent of all full-time undergraduates, compared to 2 percent in 1991. These students are disproportionately from low-income backgrounds (as well as older and ethnic minorities). Giving a leg up to such students could narrow the opportunity gap, and indeed Stephanie’s “golden” son in Atlanta exemplifies that possibility. But for-profit institutions are twice as expensive for students as public universities—and have much worse records in terms of graduation rates, employment rates, and earnings. Not surprisingly, therefore, students at for-profit institutions have much higher debt burdens (especially government-backed loans) and much higher default rates. For-profit institutions have a better track record in shorter certificate courses, but including them in estimates of college enrollment exaggerates the gains among low-income students in recent years.⁷⁸

The worst news of all, however, is this: enrolling in college is one thing, but getting a degree is quite another. The class gap in college completion, which was already substantial 30 to 40 years ago, has steadily expanded. This matters hugely, because completing college is much more important than entering college on all sorts of levels: socioeconomic success, physical and mental health, longevity, life satisfaction, and more. Figure 4.5 estimates the big picture over the past 40 years.⁷⁹ On the measure of postsecondary education that matters most—graduating from college—kids from affluent backgrounds are pulling further and further ahead, yet one more of our dispiriting scissors charts.

Figure 4.5: Growing gap in gaining a college degree, by family income, 1970–2011



Source: "Family Income and Unequal Educational Opportunity," *Postsecondary Education Opportunity* 245 (November 2012).

In terms of the labor market, some college is better than no college at all. But because the biggest boost to economic success and social mobility comes from having a college degree, kids from upper-class backgrounds are once again widening their lead in the race that matters

most. Kids from low-income backgrounds—like David, Kayla, Michelle, Lauren, Lola, and Sofia, to say nothing of Elijah—are working more or less diligently to improve their prospects in life, but no matter how talented and hardworking they are, at best they are improving their play at checkers, while upper-class kids are widening their lead at three-dimensional chess.

Summarizing the progress of rich kids and poor kids up the educational ladder in recent years, Figure 4.6 follows a single cohort of kids for a decade, from 2002 (when they were in the tenth grade) to 2012 (when most of them had climbed as far as they were likely to get).⁸⁰ The left-most pair of columns shows that most of the sophomore class of 2002 successfully received a high school diploma. That includes 92 percent of kids from the top quartile of the socioeconomic hierarchy, and 64 percent of kids from the bottom quartile.⁸¹

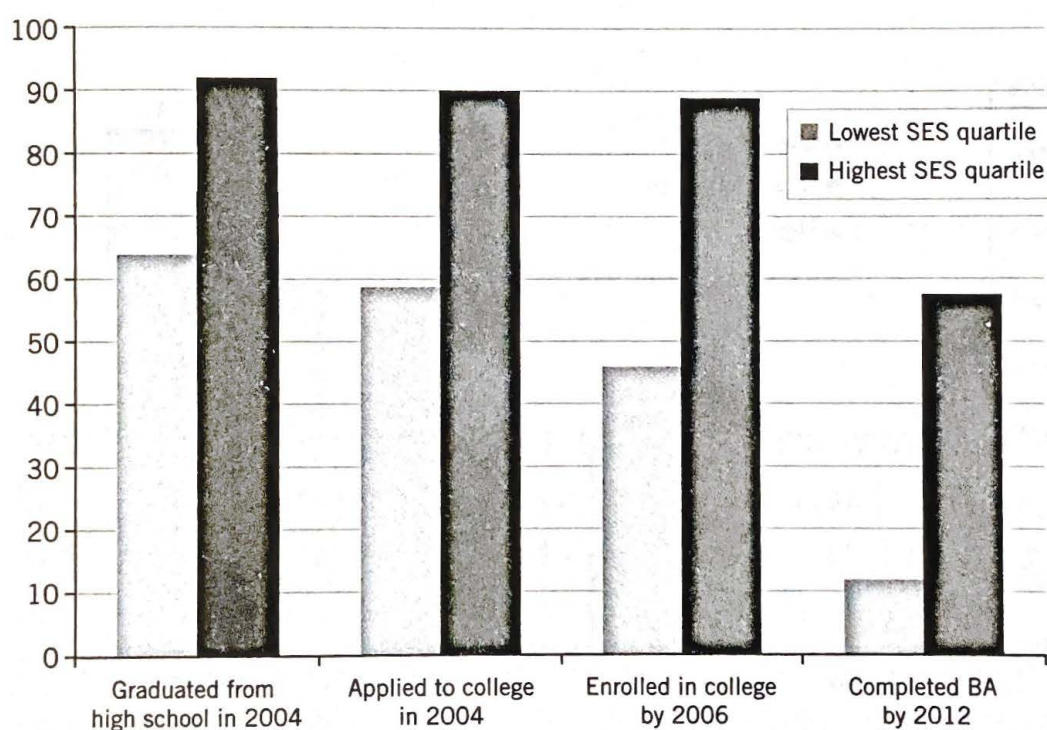
Figure 4.6 also shows that most of those who graduated from high school actually applied to college, though rich kids were much more likely to reach that rung (90 percent) than poor kids (59 percent). An even more serious winnowing took place as the kids actually crossed the threshold into college. Of all rich kids, 89 percent had enrolled in college within two years of high school graduation, compared to only 46 percent of all poor kids. And by the time this cohort actually reached the rung of college graduation, 58 percent of all rich kids had made it to the top, compared to only 12 percent of all poor kids. It was as if the poor kids had weights attached to their feet that grew heavier and heavier with each step up the ladder.

On the other hand, as we have seen throughout this chapter, it is important to distinguish between the *sites* of disparity and the *causes* of disparity. It would be too easy to assume that because family income so closely predicts college graduation, college costs must be the cause of class discrepancies. The fact that a given rung of the ladder (such as college graduation) is the site of a rapidly growing class gap does not imply that that rung itself caused the gap. In fact, all of the factors that we've discussed so far in this book—family structure, parenting, childhood

development, peer groups, extracurricular opportunities—have contributed to the widening gap in college graduation rates in recent decades, along with the neighborhood and community influences that we shall discuss in the next chapter.⁸² The burdens on the poor kids have been gathering weight since they were very young. Rising tuition costs and student debt are the final straw, not the main load.

Figure 4.6: Climbing the educational ladder (unevenly)

Of every 100 potential members of the class of 2004, roughly how many reached each rung?

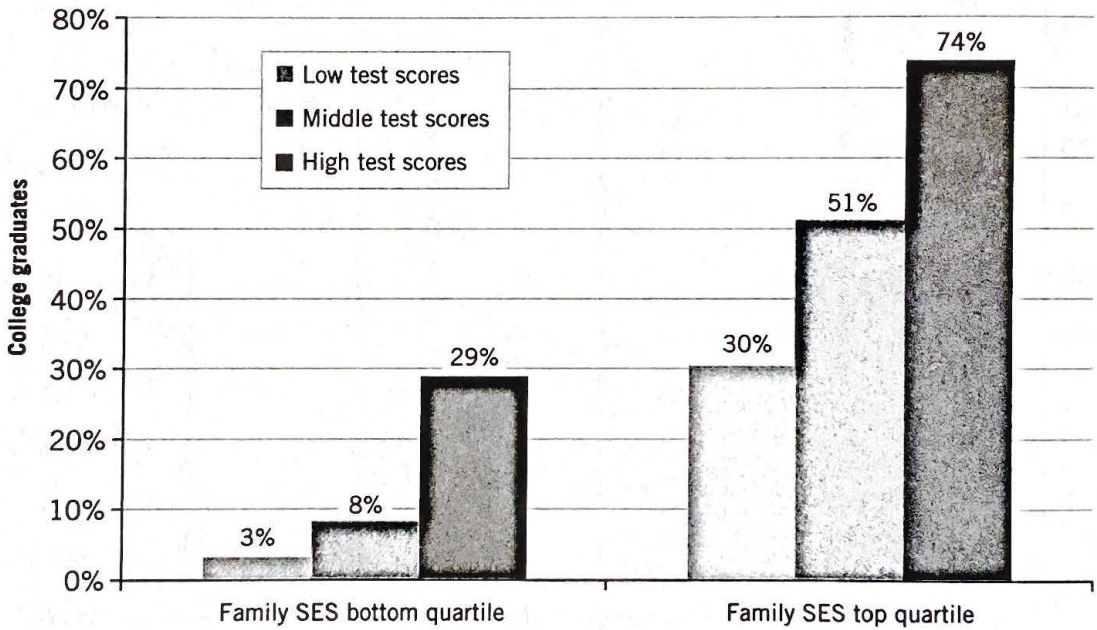


Source: Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002–2012, adjusted for prior dropouts.

Figure 4.7 brings this chapter to a close on a sobering note. As the twenty-first century opened, a family's socioeconomic status (SES) had become even more important than test scores in predicting which eighth graders would graduate from college.⁸³ A generation earlier, social class had played a smaller role, relative to academic ability, in predicting educational attainment.⁸⁴ Nowadays, high-scoring rich kids are very likely (74 percent) to graduate from college, while low-scoring poor kids almost never do (3 percent). Middling students are six times more

likely to graduate from college if they come from a more affluent family (51 percent) than if they come from a less affluent family (8 percent). Even more shocking, high-scoring poor kids are now slightly less likely (29 percent) to get a college degree than low-scoring rich kids (30 percent). That last fact is particularly hard to square with the idea at the heart of the American Dream: equality of opportunity.

Figure 4.7: Family background matters more than 8th grade test scores for college graduation



Source: National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88/2000), Fourth Follow-up.