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## Disparities In Education Resources Within the State of Arkansas

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Disparities In Education Resources Within the State of Arkansas

By Hunter Simmons

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout the state of Arkansas, there are grave disparities in education resources apparent in specific school districts and at a state level. The Arkansas Department of Education, formerly titled the State Department of Education, was established in 1931 by Act 169 in the Arkansas General Assembly. Since then, the department has gone under multiple reforms and expansions. From desegregation to the Clinton administration's improvements in early childhood education, Arkansas has had a tumultuous past in terms of public education and has consistently been ranked in the bottom twentieth percentile of the nation's school systems. The purpose of this paper is to examine the disparities that are present in Arkansas schools by analyzing statistics from the Arkansas Department of Education in order to create a clear understanding of the structures in place which directly affect the quality of student's education. With this clear understanding, policy recommendations can be made to improve the quality of public education in Arkansas.

## **BACKGROUND**

Education reform in the state of Arkansas has a tumultuous past. According to the Encyclopedia of Arkansas, education reform is defined as "the process of improving public education through changes in public policy, [and] has been slow and often ineffective in Arkansas." (Holley, 2020) These public policy initiatives usually involve school finance, teacher quality, curriculum, transportation, and school facilities. The very earliest education reform came during governor Archibald Yell's administration from 1840 to 1844 when a program of state aid for public schools was introduced (Holley,

2020). Through the centuries, state universities and colleges were established, funding was gradually allocated toward public schools, and public policy continually reformed Arkansas' education system. Despite those efforts, Arkansas still ranks below national averages for public schooling. In addition, Arkansas has one of the most undereducated citizen populations in the nation when looking at the percentage of adults with college degrees and high school diplomas; ranking within the bottom five states for both categories. Many of these issues stem from the state's history of segregation, poor teacher salaries, and lack of legislative support.

During the 1920s, the State Teachers Association of Arkansas, which is Arkansas' African-American educator organization, aimed to improve the education quality of black students. The issue they came across was the disparities resulting from local autonomy in spending state education funding. Take Chicot County for example, which during the 1929 to 1930 academic year, the per-student expenditure was \$6.36 for students of color and \$54.11 for students of the majority (Holley, 2020). This is a single example of discrepancies in educational resource spending that were allocated based on race. Due to school segregation, the availability of quality education was restricted to white students who attended school with more funding and greater resources for a large part of Arkansas history of public education.

The groundbreaking United States Supreme Court case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954 resulted in Arkansas public schools being forced to integrate. White supremacists in that state were not conducive or accepting of these efforts, starting boycotts and actively working against integration. The first fight for integration happened in the town of Hoxie, which resided in Lawrence County. Eventually, the

Hoxie school board sued the segregationists for obstruction. Through federal judicial intervention integration in Arkansas took a small but sure step forward.

Governor Bill Clinton arguably left the greatest impact on educational reform during his terms compared to any other governor. During his first term, Clinton's top legislative priority was education. His agenda set forth new teacher competency examinations, standardized student achievement testing, widespread consolidation, and a "fair dismissal" law to protect teacher tenure. However, Clinton struggled to get the Arkansas General Assembly to approve any tax increases to support his reforms. In 1983, the Supreme Court of Arkansas ruled in the Dupree v. Alma School District case that the state's funding formula was unconstitutional. According to Marc J. Holley in his article "Education Reform," this case agreed that "the state government had consistently failed to provide the money and programs that would guarantee a suitable education for all children in Arkansas regardless of where they lived." (Holley, 2020) Because of this ruling, Clinton had more momentum to pursue his education reform goals during his second term and was able to raise state taxes by one percent to fund them. Arkansas' first lady Rodham Clinton headed the Education Standards Committee, which aimed to bring greater teacher quality, more rigorous curriculum, a longer school year, and smaller class sizes to the state's education system.

In the United States today, there are categorical inequalities between black and white students. According to the Civil Rights Data Collection, there are "persistent gaps between Black and white students on educational outcomes such as school suspensions, uptake of AP classes, assignment to special education and gifted and

talented classes, and grade-level retention.” (Shores, Kim, & Still, 2020) All of these issues can be explained through in-school and out-of-school factors that are examined in a study done by the Brookings Institution. In-school factors include teachers’ experience on race and ethnicity and demographic variables. Out-of-school factors include students’ families’ household income and parent’s educational attainment. For example, discrepancies in test scores, suspension rates, advanced-course enrollment, and assignment to specialized classes can all be accounted for by analyzing a student’s socio-economic background. Racial disparities exist within the American public education system today and are putting students of color at a disadvantage.

Johns Hopkins University conducted research that shows a positive correlation between the success of minority students when they are taught by a teacher of color. In their 2018 study, Rosen notes that “Having one black teacher in elementary school not only makes [black] children more likely to graduate high school—it also makes them significantly more likely to enroll in college.” (Rosen, 2018) The findings go on to exhibit a greater retention rate and a higher likelihood of attending college for minority students the more teachers of color they have while young. Whenever there is a large discrepancy in the demographics of teachers and students of color, student success factors for minority students will likely be affected negatively.

Given the current trends and knowing the history, the Arkansas public education system has disparities that are grossly not dissimilar to past circumstances, and are even reminiscent of past academic conditions. However much the Arkansas Department of Education has progressed and political administrations have pushed

reform, there are still variances between the education resources available to students depending on what school they attend and the zip code they reside from. Factors like free and reduced lunches, AP enrollment, dropout and withdrawal rates, per-pupil expenditures, college-going rates, and teacher to student of color ratios when analyzed between schools within the same district that have varying student demographics are evidence of this phenomenon.

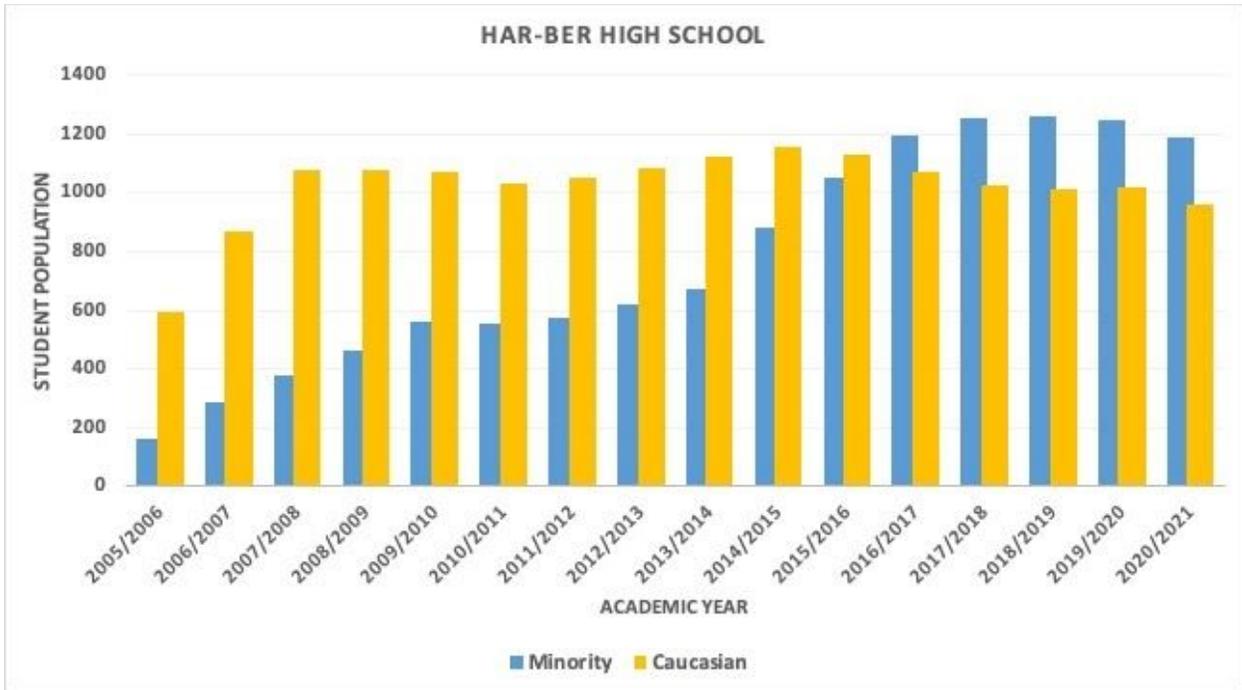
### **SPRINGDALE SCHOOL DISTRICT**

The Springdale school district, located in Northwest Arkansas, is a perfect example of education disparities that can be present within a singular district. At the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year, Har-ber High School opened to students; dividing the district between two separate High Schools. Ever since its inception, there have been noticeable differences in demographics, the number of students on free or reduced lunches, enrollment in advanced placement classes, and retention rates. These statistics are evidence of grave disparities between the resources available at Springdale High School and Har-ber High School, which result in variances of student success depending on which school they are zoned for.

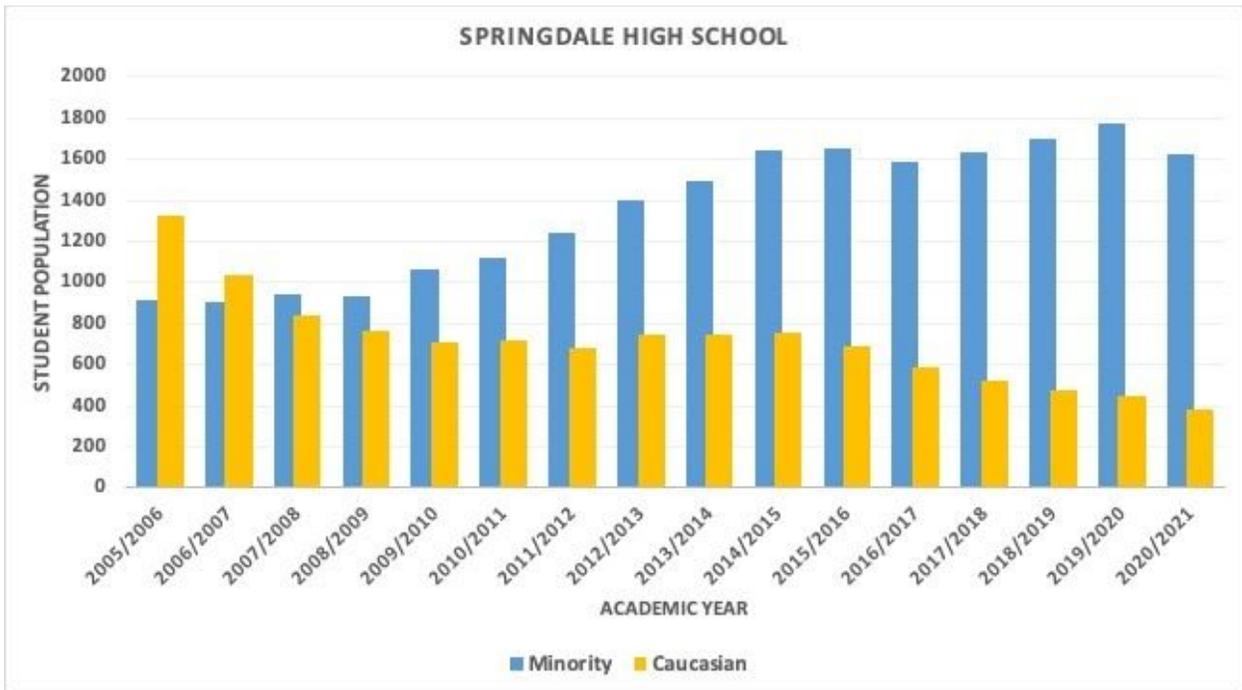
### **STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS**

The following double bar graphs depict the differentiation of minority student enrollment compared to caucasian student enrollment between each high school from the 2005/2006 academic year, when Har-ber High School opened, to the present. Minority students are comprised of Asian, black, Hispanic, Native American/Native

Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ethnicities, as well as students with two or more ethnicities.



Sources: Arkansas Department of Education Data Center. Retrieved November 2020.

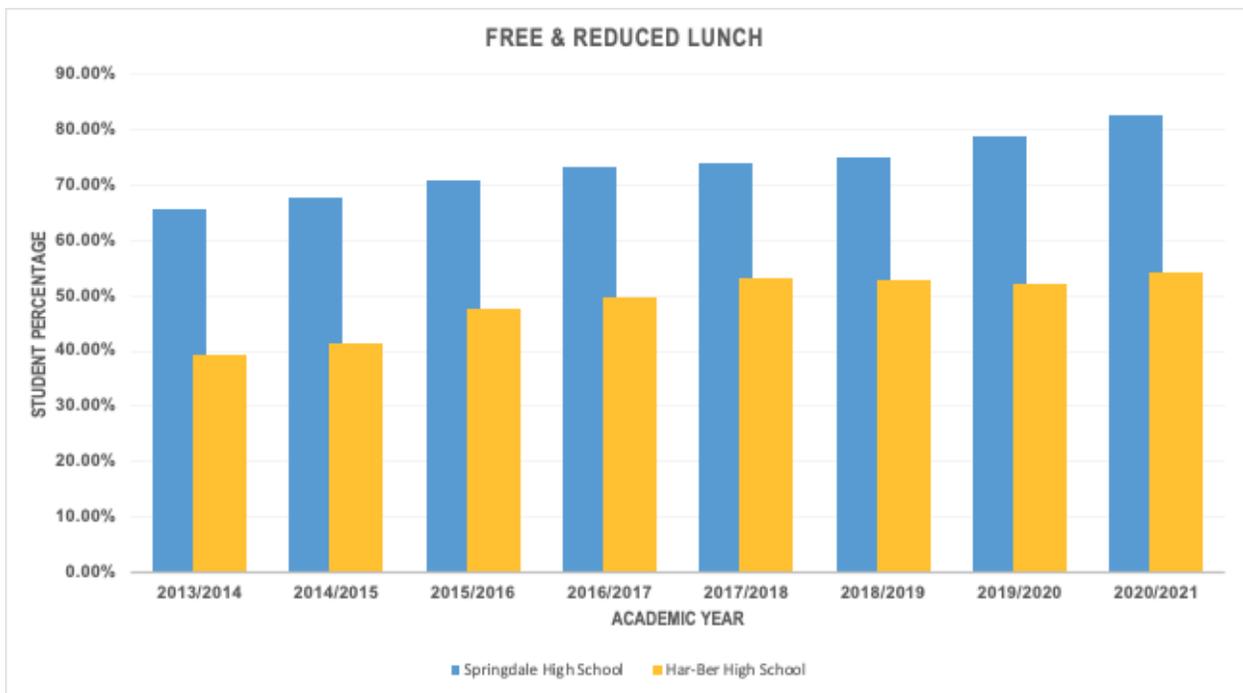


Sources: Arkansas Department of Education Data Center. Retrieved November 2020.

The statistics show a significantly higher population of caucasian students at Har-ber High School compared to Springdale High School. Minority student populations continually increase at both high schools, while the caucasian student population is generally decreasing at Springdale High School and increasing at Har-ber. This phenomenon can be evidence of red-lining and reminiscent of segregation when it comes to drawing the school district map. However, student demographics alone are not evidence of education resource disparities.

### FREE AND REDUCED LUNCHES

The following double bar graph depicts the breakdown of students who receive free and reduced lunches at each high school for the academic years 2013/2014 to 2020/2021 by percentage.

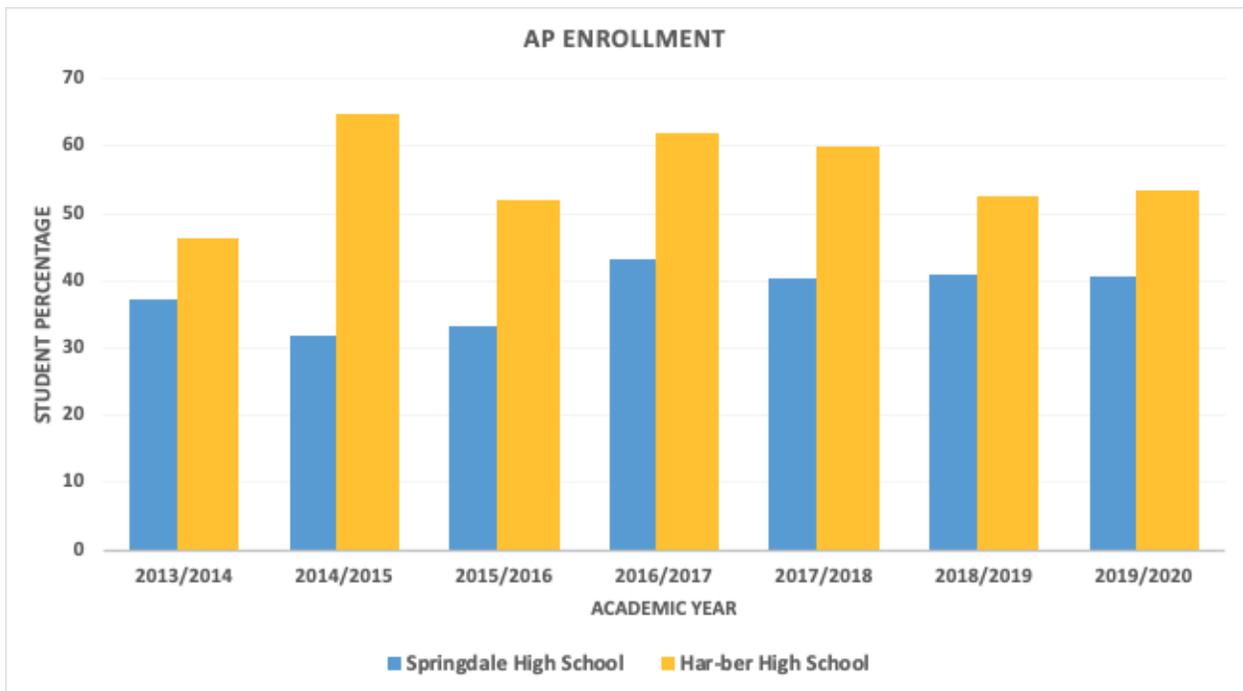


Sources: Arkansas Department of Education Data Center. Retrieved November 2020.

It is evident that there are more students at Springdale High School receiving free and reduced lunches each year compared to Har-ber High School students.

### AP ENROLLMENT

The following double bar graph depicts the breakdown of students who are enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses at each high school from the 2013/2014 to the 2019/2020 academic year by percentage.



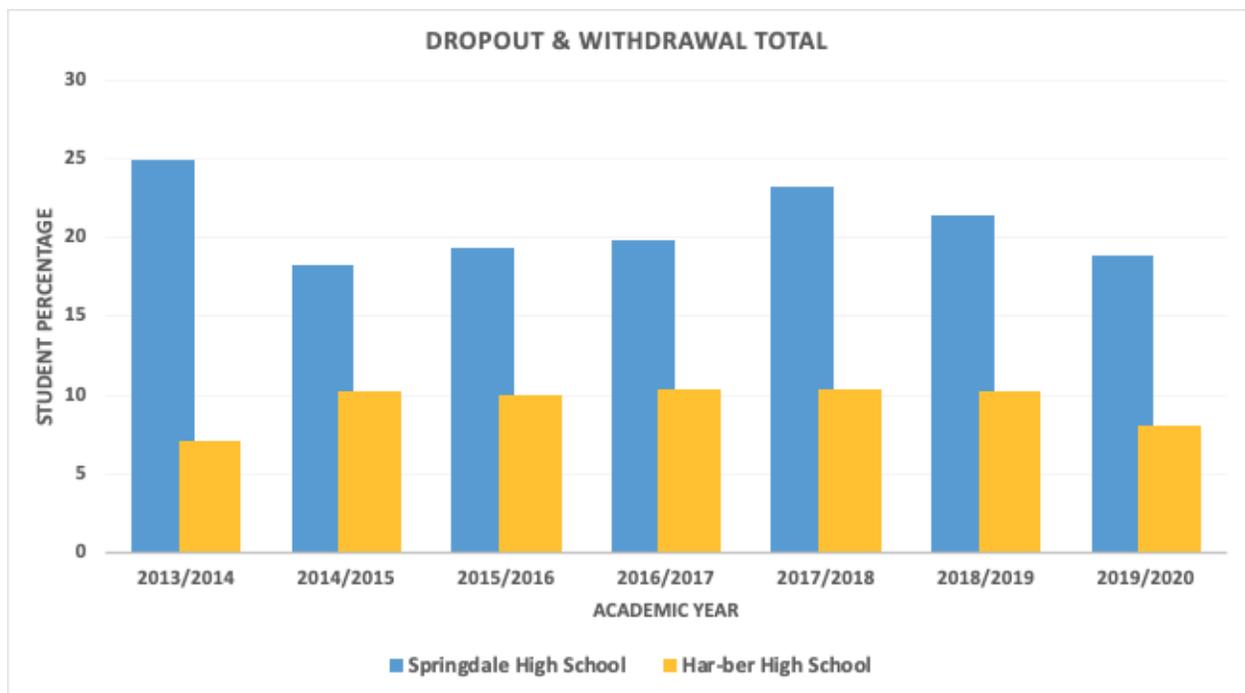
Sources: Arkansas Department of Education Data Center. Retrieved November 2020.

From these statistics, it is evident that Har-ber High School consistently has a greater number of students who participate in AP courses compared to Springdale High School. Not a single year were there more students enrolled in AP courses at Springdale High School than at Har-ber. When researched further, it is evident that the number of AP courses offered at each high school also varies. AP coursework

represents access to higher academic opportunities, such as secondary education. Discrepancies in the availability of these classes can be detrimental to students.

### DROPOUT AND WITHDRAWAL TOTALS

The following double bar graph depicts the total number of students who either dropped out or were withdrawn from each high school within each academic year from 2013/2014 to 2019/2020 by percentage.

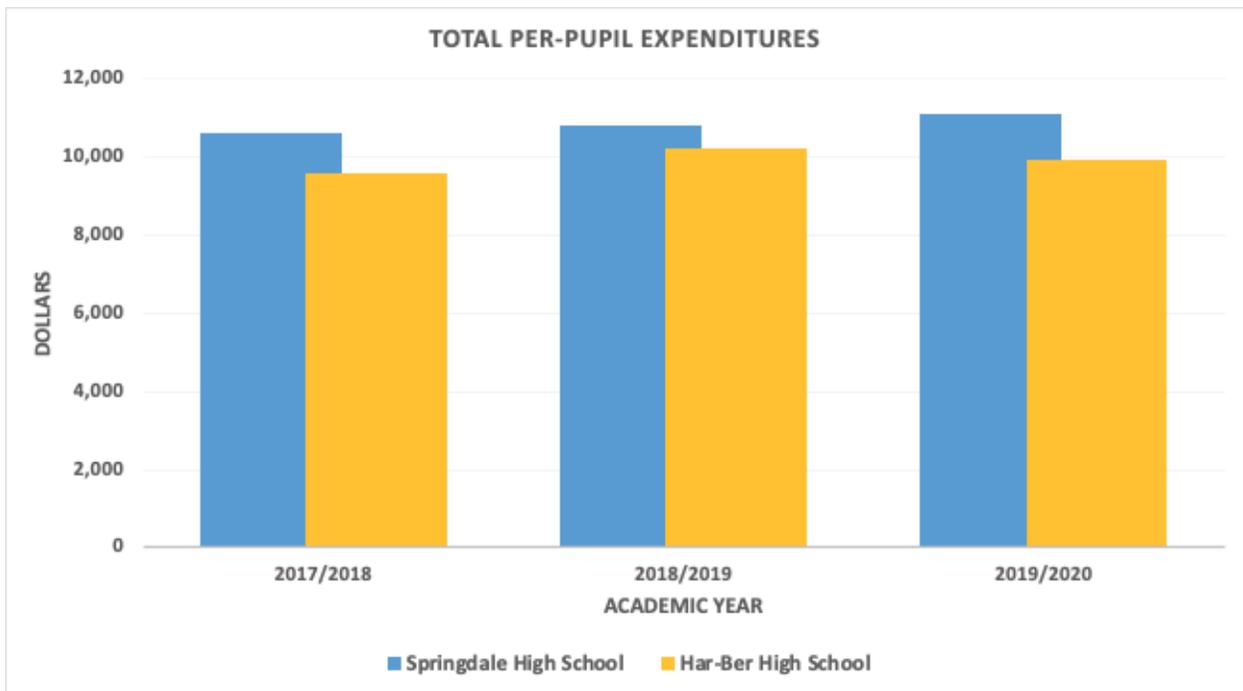


Sources: Arkansas Department of Education Data Center. Retrieved November 2020.

Springdale High School consistently experiences more student dropouts and withdrawals every year, so much so that there are hundreds of more student dropouts within every academic year. This data also proves that Har-ber High School's retention rate is greater than that of Springdale High Schools.

## PER-PUPIL EXPENDITURES

Perhaps the most surprising of all statistics between both high schools in Springdale, AR is the per-pupil expenditures. Every factor previously analyzed points to a funding discrepancy between schools, with Har-ber most likely receiving greater funding. However, there is a very little discrepancy at all when looking at the data. The following double bar graph compares the per-pupil expenditures for the years that were on record through the Arkansas Department of Education:



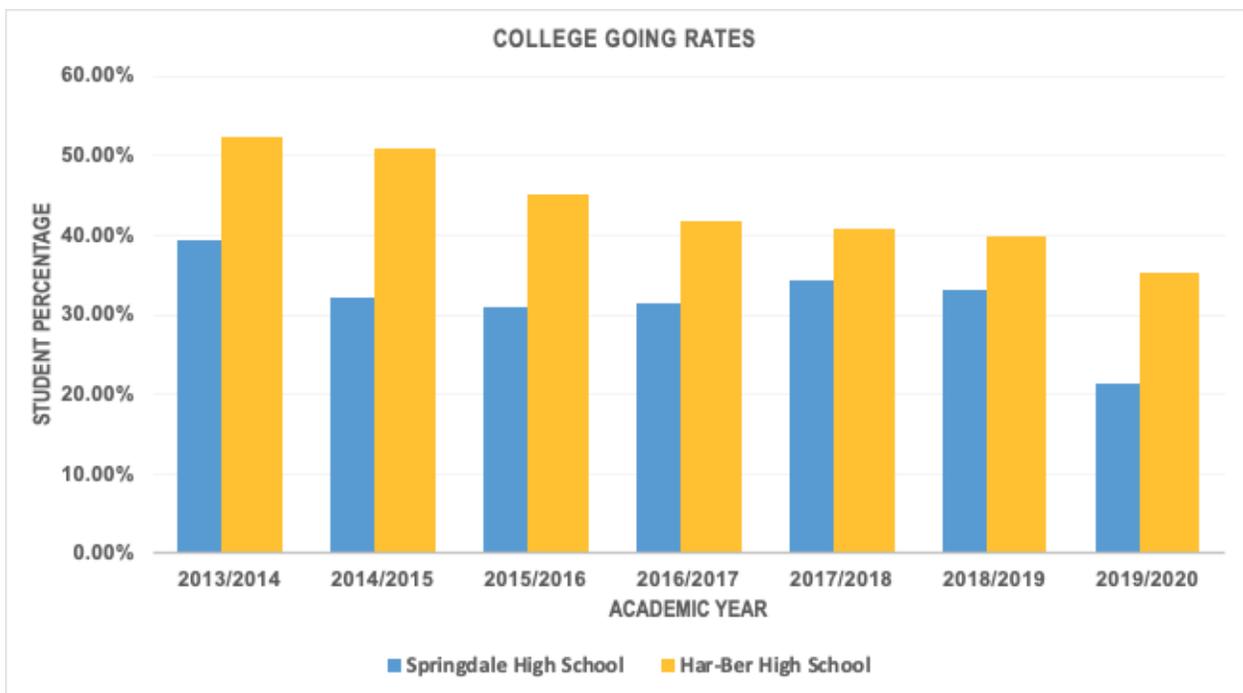
Sources: Arkansas Department of Education Data Center. Retrieved November 2020.

Many school districts that have demographics varying in student success and resources have expenditures that end up reflecting higher per-pupil spending on the lower-performing schools. Spending can be associated with lower performance because of reverse-causality. The spending follows lower student success rates. With the

funding expenditures fully realized, it begs the question, what is the cause for the education discrepancies between the two schools?

### COLLEGE GOING RATES

The following double-bar graph depicts the college going rates in percentages of students at Springdale High School and Har-ber High School for the school years 2013/2014 to 2019/2020:



Sources: Arkansas Department of Education Data Center. Retrieved November 2020.

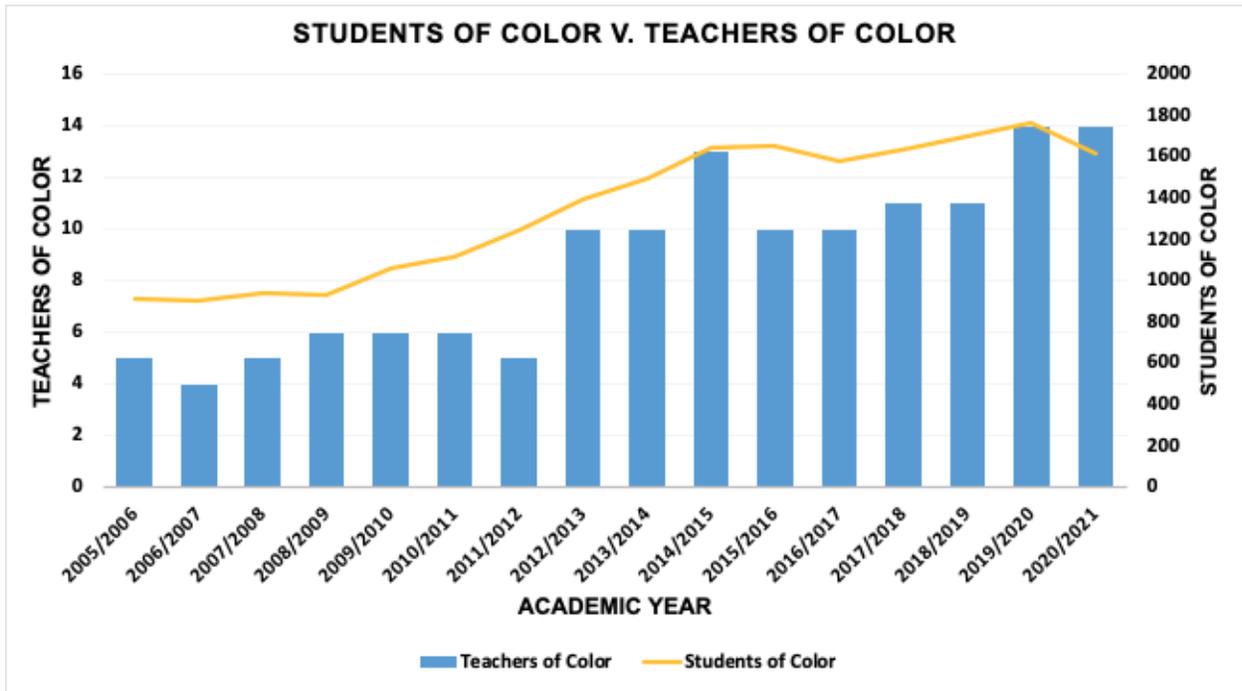
From the graph, it is evident that Har-ber High School has a consecutively higher number of students who attend college after graduation. In the 2014/2015 school year, Har-ber High School had eighteen percent more of their graduating students attend college. This factor in itself is a very significant discrepancy in student success.

The trend overall is that college-going rates are decreasing between both schools. This trend is comparable to a larger, nationwide trend where fewer students are attending colleges and universities. Since 2011, student enrollment at U.S. colleges and universities has decreased by 11 percent, which puts it at a tangible amount of about 2.3 million students (Nadworny & Larkin, 2019). One reason cited for this is the economy. When unemployment rates are low, people will forgo school and enter the workforce. U.S. demographics are also shifting to reflect a lower birth rate, meaning that fewer students are graduating high school overall. The cost of attending college is also increasing. While states are putting less money into higher education, colleges are increasing tuition and scholarships and funding options are staying stagnant. This all leads to a greater price to pay for students and families who want to attend college.

### **TEACHERS OF COLOR**

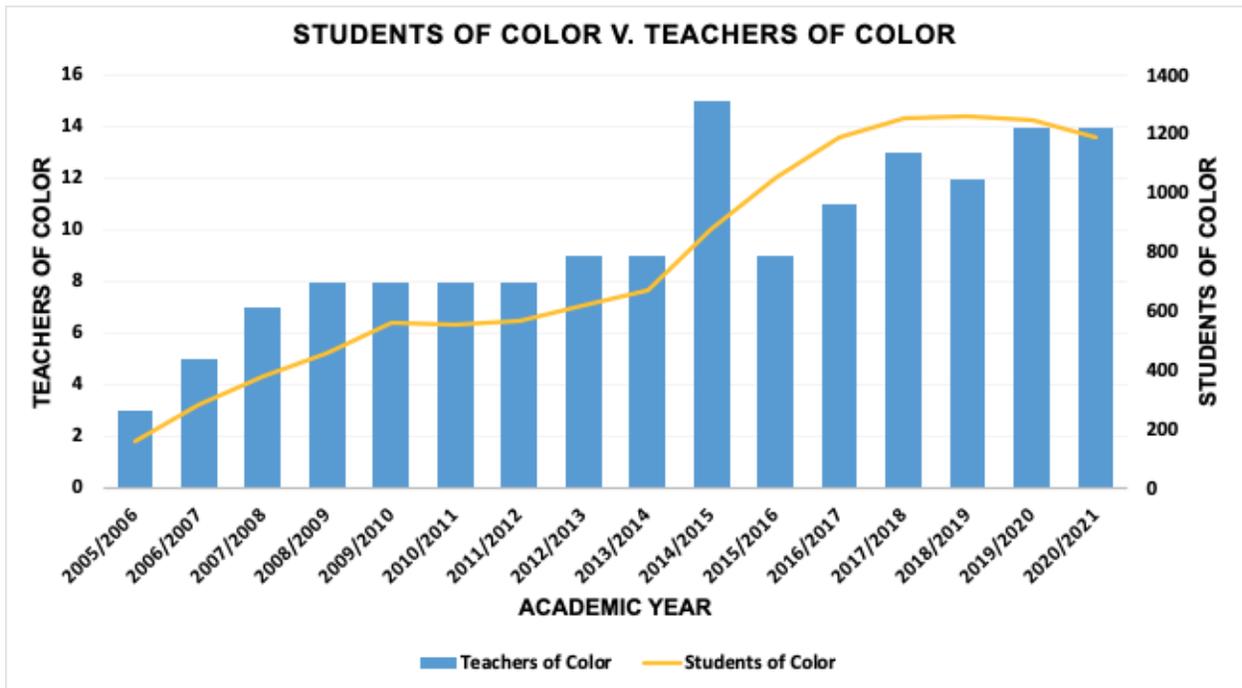
One “in-school” factor that was included in Shores, Kim, & Still’s 2020 study of categorical inequalities between black and white students was the number of teachers of color compared to students of color. As previously explained, Springdale High School has a high number of students of color enrolled which is continuously growing. However, the number of teachers of color pale in comparison. Ever since Harbor High School was opened and the schools split, there have never been more than fourteen teachers of color, compared to the thousands of students of color each year. The following bar graphs depict the number of students of color and teachers of color on separate y-axes for the school years 2005/2006 to 2020/2021 for both High Schools:

## SPRINGDALE HIGH SCHOOL



Sources: Arkansas Department of Education Data Center. Retrieved November 2020.

## HAR-BER HIGH SCHOOL



Sources: Arkansas Department of Education Data Center. Retrieved November 2020.

This factor can help explain some of the discrepancies in student success that were previously examined. If a school has a large minority student population and no teachers to reflect that demographic, there can be grave misunderstandings due to cultural differences and lack of training in diversity and inclusion. Not to say these differences cannot be overcome, but as studies have shown, students benefit from having teachers that look like them at different points in their education. As noted in the background, there is a specific positive correlation between college-going and graduation rates of minority students who have minority teachers. Johns Hopkins University found that retention and college-going rates increased for minority students when they have teachers of color during their K-12 years.

From the graphs, it is evident that Har-ber High School has fewer students of color, but more teachers of color when compared to Springdale High School. Per single teacher of color, there would be a greater ratio of students of color for Springdale High School than Har-ber. Essentially, minority students at Har-ber High School are at a greater advantage, having more teachers of color. It is reasonable to argue that the dropout and withdrawal rates at Springdale High School would decrease if more teachers of color were employed.

## **CONCLUSION**

There are major disparities in education resources within the state of Arkansas, specifically within the case study of the Springdale School District. After Har-ber High School was opened in 2005, statistics show discrepancies in student demographics, free and reduced lunches, AP enrollment, dropout and withdrawal rates, per-pupil

expenditures, and teacher to student of color ratios compared to Springdale High School. As expressed in the background, Arkansas has a rough history with public education and gross disparities when it comes to equality of academic opportunities for all students. However, some measures can be taken to equitably improve student success at a school level.

In terms of public policy, school districts that have varying student success statistics between the same grade levels at different schools, like Springdale High School and Har-ber High School, can implement programs and policies to try and alleviate the discrepancies. There is a noticeable difference in student demographics between both the High Schools in Springdale. Springdale High School has a decreasing number of white students, while both high schools have an increasing number of minority students noticed at the time Har-ber was opened up to now. However, Springdale High School has always had a greater number of minority students; in their case, minority students have always been the majority student population since 2007. As previously discussed, students of color benefit from having teachers of color. Retention and college-going rates of minority students significantly increase when they are taught by a teacher of color. Even though Springdale High School has a far greater number of minority students, Har-ber High School has either more or the same amount of minority teachers depending on the school year. Springdale High School consecutively almost has double the number of drop out and withdrawals. These statistics suggest that Springdale High School would benefit from employing more teachers of color, thus realizing an increase in the retention rate. Whether this is a tangible policy, a program, or simply a conscious effort by administrators, school

districts that are experiencing similar trends to Springdale should implement a plan to employ a greater number of minority teachers.

In addition to employing more teachers of color, the state of Arkansas must prioritize education in order to improve these statistics. According to the U.S. News and World Report, Arkansas currently ranks forty-first in education (Ziegler 2020). Over the years, Arkansas has consistently ranked in the bottom twentieth percentile of the nation's school systems. Education is not a priority in our state, and taking statistics into account, it never has. In order to improve the disparities analyzed in this paper and ensure a better education for all Arkansas students, that state must prioritize education at a state level.

The trends analyzed in this paper are dramatic and timely. Multiple factors of student success continue to worsen as each academic year passes at Springdale High School. They will not change unless the Springdale School district does. By employing more teachers of color and prioritizing education, these factors have a substantial chance of improving. Springdale School Districts' motto, which can be found in capitalized letters on the main page of their website, is "Teach Them All, All Means All." For a district that professes its devotion toward educating all students, these steps to alleviate discrepancies in student success that have been present for over a decade are a simple request.

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