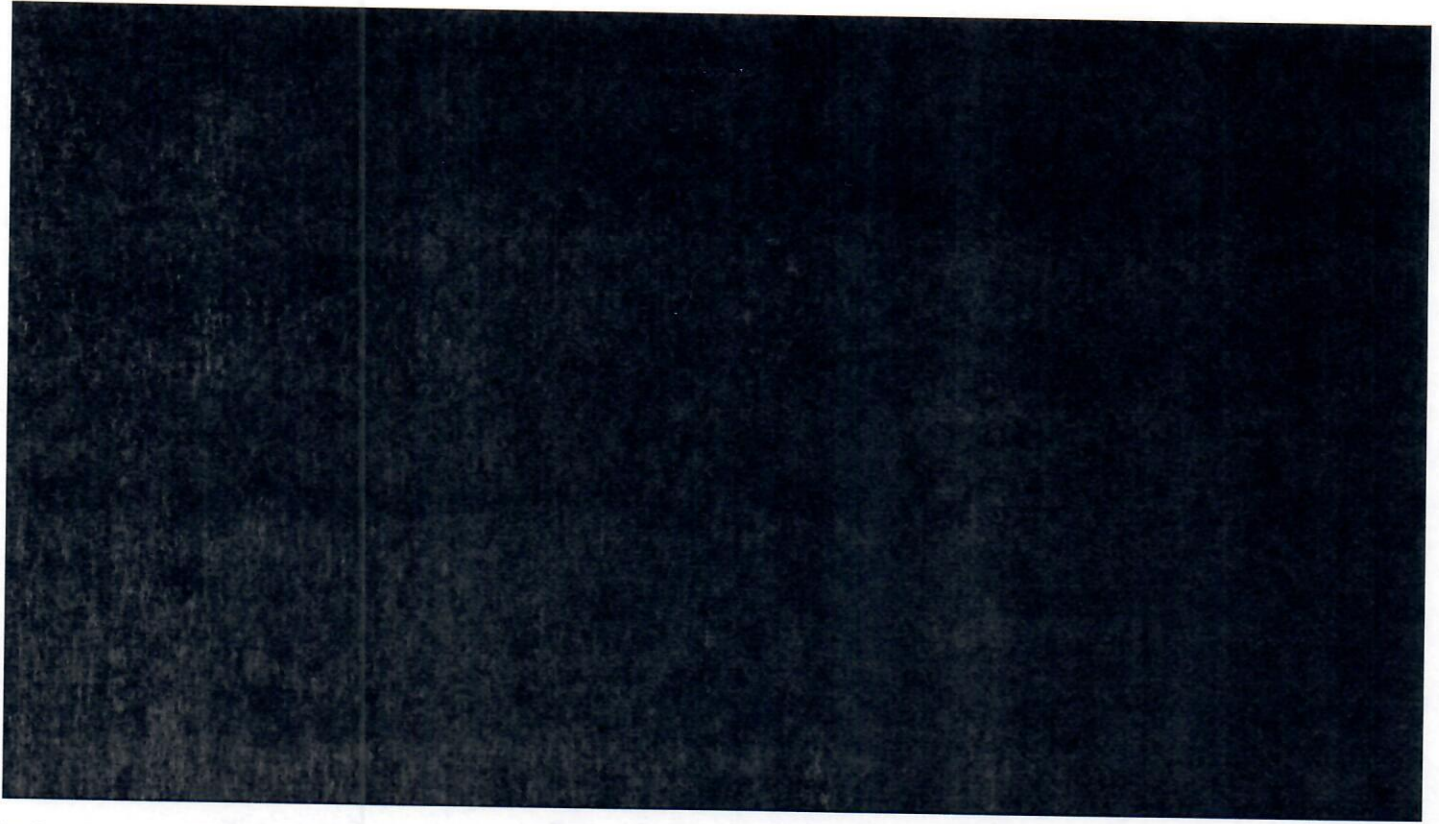


# Bridging the Divide: Within integrated schools, de facto segregation persists



In Part Three of The Sun's 'Bridging the Divide' series, we meet Eli and Mikey, two best friends at Hammond High School who have experienced modern-day segregation in the school system in very different ways. (Lloyd Fox / Baltimore Sun)

By **Erica L. Green**

The Baltimore Sun

MARCH 25, 2017, 1:42 PM

**T**hey were classmates and best friends, and they both wanted to get into the 11th-grade Advanced Placement English class at Columbia's Hammond High School.

Since meeting in summer school just before ninth grade, Mikey Peterson and Eli Sauerwalt had been through a lot together. They'd each battled depression, they'd failed classes, they'd encouraged each other to do better.

As 10th-graders in English, the teens were each hoping for a prized recommendation to the AP English class for their junior year.

Eli had doubts about whether AP English was for him. His attendance had been poor, and he had barely passed some assignments. But for the teacher, he said, it was never even a question.

You can do this, he recalled her saying. This is what you should do.

Mikey also asked his teacher about AP English. Despite failing several assignments, he believed he could thrive in a more competitive environment.

Her response, as he remembered it: Do you really want to do that to yourself?

The following fall, Eli, who is white, enrolled in AP English. "I was always kind of told I belonged," he said.

Mikey, who is black, enrolled in regular English. "That's where the black kids are," he said.

Howard County is the most integrated school district in the region, according to the Maryland Equity Project of the University of Maryland. Children of different races — especially those who are black and white — are more likely to sit next to each other in Howard than almost anywhere else in the state.

But within that diversity, school leaders have uncovered a de facto system of segregation.

Enrollment data obtained by The Baltimore Sun through a public records request shows that the district's advanced classes — honors, gifted and talented, and AP — are disproportionately white, while the regular and remedial classes are disproportionately black.

There are twice as many white students as black students in Howard schools. But demographics alone doesn't explain the disparities.

In elementary school, nearly five times as many white students as black students are enrolled in gifted and talented courses. In middle school, it's nearly four times as many.

By high school, where the menu of advanced classes expands to include honors, the gaps persist, with twice as many white students in honors classes and three times as many in gifted and talented

courses.

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**Even if these kids are performing on par with other groups, we tend to look right past them. There is unquestionably bias in the system there. This is a pervasive problem.**

— Jonathan Plucker, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education

Those courses are often an on-ramp to the coveted AP courses, considered the pinnacle of a successful high school career and the best preparation for college.

By the time students reach AP classes, white students outnumber black students 4-1.

Research shows that integration benefits all students. But the experience of Howard County — consistently ranked among the strongest public school districts in the nation — demonstrates that bringing students of different backgrounds together in the same schools isn't enough to ensure their success.

Where educators have long spoken of the achievement gap — the differences in academic performance between white students and black, and affluent and poor — some are now focusing on the so-called opportunity gap.

"'Achievement gap' situates students as deficient," said Vanessa Dodo Seriki, co-director of the Center for Innovation in Urban Education at Loyola University Maryland. "'Opportunity gap' suggests that some students are afforded opportunities to experience academic success while others are not.

"These missed opportunities are a result of structural inequalities, personal bias and deficit perspectives that are commonly held about black and brown children."

It's not unique to Howard. Nationwide, about half of all black, Hispanic and Native American students aren't enrolling in the AP classes they're qualified for, according to the College Board. And

studies show that younger, high-performing black students are less likely than their white counterparts to be placed in courses for the gifted and talented.

Educators and academics say it's one of the nation's most pressing challenges.

"Even if these kids are performing on par with other groups, we tend to look right past them," said Jonathan Plucker, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education. "There is unquestionably bias in the system there. This is a pervasive problem."

Howard leaders say they have been working to close racial disparities in advanced courses and programs — work they say is crucial if they are to move the 55,000-student district forward.

Superintendent Renee Foose said the effort has required the system to confront a harsh truth.

"We're battling a culture and mindset of 'Some kids can, and some kids can't,'" Foose said. "We're not giving students the opportunities they're entitled to."

Researchers have studied the opportunity gap at the high school level. Less well-documented is what happens in the years before entry to those classes. The Howard County data is a rare look that reveals black students at every level are missing opportunities for which they are qualified.

School officials said they began finding evidence of this in 2012, when Foose took the helm of the school system.

Black students who were demonstrating an ability to perform at or above grade level were being placed in remedial courses, Foose said. Elementary school students were being excluded from screening for gifted and talented courses, losing their chance to get on the track for high-level courses through middle school.

In high school, black students who were showing the potential for success in AP courses on standardized exams were not given an opportunity to take those classes, while their white and Asian classmates who were not meeting the threshold were.

"There was a lot of gatekeeping that has a lot to do with expectations and mindset," said Grace Chesney, who heads Howard County's accountability office. "The data showed that."

Foose has ordered more testing to spot bright students who might have been missed in the past. The district is taking other measures to eliminate barriers to advanced courses, such as dropping some prerequisites, and encouraging students and their families to get more involved in the course selection process.

Those efforts, begun in the 2012-13 school year, have put Howard County at the forefront statewide in addressing the opportunity gap, Plucker said. But challenges remain.

## **Outside Looking In**

Mikey sat in Eli's AP English class, taking detailed notes on "Their Eyes Were Watching God," Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel about an African-American woman coming of age in early 20th-century Florida. He says he found himself growing more resentful by the minute.

He knew that the connection he felt to characters in the book would be short-lived, and he'd soon be back to shallow conversations about characters in "The Crucible" in his regular English 11 class.

He had asked to sit in on Eli's AP English class — the one he says his 10th-grade teacher questioned his ability to thrive in, at the same time she encouraged his white friend to take a chance.

The teacher, who asked not to be named, said she did not want to comment on the students' accounts of their conversations because she did not want to diminish their experiences. She said she made her best call at the time. She said she was worried that Mikey wasn't ready for the AP class, and she didn't want to set him up to fail.

But the window into what could have been made him angry.

"I didn't feel that was fair, that they get to learn about my culture's history," he said. "I feel like I missed out. The way they discussed the book, the way they took notes, it just felt right."

The experience, Mikey said, was emblematic of most of his educational career — he has been stuck in classes where he feels he doesn't belong, and watching as opportunities pass him by. When he was in fourth grade, his mother moved to Columbia because of its reputation for educational opportunity and diversity. But he doesn't feel those promises worked out for him.

In middle school, he felt that because he was talkative and liked to have fun in class, his teachers had

written him off as average.

By 10th grade, when he says his teacher asked him whether he really wanted to take AP English, he felt discouraged. To get into the classes, students need either a recommendation from a teacher, or the parent or student has to sign a waiver.

After talking to his mother, Mikey decided to follow his teacher's advice.

It wasn't until 11th grade, he said, that a teacher told him he should be taking AP courses. She was a minority, too.

"I never had a white teacher tell me, 'You have the ability to do this,'" he said, "because they've already given that opportunity to another white person."

Eli could understand why his friend felt that way.

For as long as Eli can remember, he had been challenged to do better — especially when he failed. The 17-year-old had attended schools in Howard County since third grade.

"I've been hearing for years about how much great potential I have — and I just needed to get things together," he said. "I was definitely given the benefit of the doubt in ways I know other students weren't."

One of the students he meant was Mikey. Eli shared his friend's disappointment when he was promoted to AP English and Mikey wasn't.

The students' suspicions that their educational trajectories were guided by their race mirrors research on the subject.

Researchers from Johns Hopkins who studied teachers' expectations of their students concluded that their views differed depending on the races of the student and the teacher.

In a national study of 4,000 teachers and 6,000 students, they reported white teachers expected significantly less academic success from black students than black teachers did.

When teachers evaluated the same black student, the researchers said, white teachers are almost 40 percent less likely than black teachers to expect that the student will graduate from high school, and

30 percent less likely to predict the student will complete a four-year college degree.

"If you have two teachers saying different things, one of them is wrong," said study co-author Nicholas Papageorge, a Hopkins economist.

The teachers generally agreed on their predicted outcomes for white students, the researchers said.

In some cases, Papageorge said, the teachers' expectations could be accurate.

But he warned they can also be self-fulfilling prophecies: Teachers might devote more time and attention to students they believe, consciously or unconsciously, have greater chances of success.

In recent years, school districts around the country — including Howard County — have begun to focus on getting teachers to recognize their implicit bias through training in cultural competence.

"I don't think we're trying to root out racists," Papageorge said. "If we were, we could just go find them and fire them."

"What I'm worried about is the well-intentioned white teacher who thinks a kid has a slightly lower chance of going to college and reallocates resources away from them. ... Teachers' expectations matter."

### **The teachers**

Foose, who has publicly battled the Howard County school board over power and transparency issues, says that her initiatives to expand opportunities for black students through use of more tests and data have met with resistance.

She says teachers have complained to her and principals that the new exams used to capture more minority students are taking too much instruction time.

Foose said the county's testing time — 2 percent of instruction time — remains the lowest in the state.

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“Our society needs teachers to identify

# students who can succeed in advanced academic pursuits ... and teachers want to engage in the necessary work of overcoming our biases.”

— Paul Lemle, president of the Howard County Education Association

The leader of the union that represents Howard County teachers, Paul Lemle, said he was not aware of any pushback against efforts to diversify high-level courses, and that educators share the district's goal. He said the teachers have not been approached for suggestions on how to achieve it.

Lemle, president of the Howard County Education Association, called the enrollment gap a "critical, systemic issue."

"Teachers agree that minority participation is crucial both for the students themselves and for a more robust marketplace of ideas in the advanced classes that would benefit all students," Lemle said. "HCPSS should make any system-wide changes necessary to get every student in the most rigorous and appropriate classes."

He also said teachers "frequently assist students who are struggling, having been placed in advanced classes without adequate preparation."

Teachers' recommendations are secondary to parent and student wishes in determining whether students are admitted to high-level courses. But it's the teachers, Lemle noted, who work with students and can spot creativity, skill, and ability that's not captured in a test score.

"Our society needs teachers to identify students who can succeed in advanced academic pursuits," Lemle said, "and teachers want to engage in the necessary work of overcoming our biases."

## **Students mismatched**

The extra tests that Howard schools are now using are part of a larger effort to make decisions about student placements more objective.

When school officials began to confront principals, teachers and other gatekeepers with such data,



Foose said, there were results.

One test, the Measure of Academic Progress, captured nearly 2,000 elementary students this year who were in reading and math classes below their grade levels. They have been moved up a grade level.

School leaders also began a census to screen all third-graders for gifted and talented math courses, opening up the process beyond those students nominated by their teachers or parents. Since 2012, the percentage of black elementary school students enrolled in gifted and talented math courses has risen from 7.2 percent to 10 percent.

The number of black middle-school students enrolled in gifted and talented courses in English, science and social studies has doubled.

In high school, more black students are taking AP courses — and more are passing the exams. In 2015, 65 percent of black AP students scored 3 or higher on the standardized exam given at the conclusion of the course. The statewide rate for black students was 34 percent.

Howard was the only district in Maryland last year to increase its participation rates and maintain the percentage of students earning a 3 or higher on the exams.

School leaders have begun to remove dozens of prerequisites to AP and other advanced courses — classes they said put up unnecessary barriers.

These prerequisites "were courses teachers could lean on to say, 'We don't need you here,'" said Ebony Langford-Brown, director of the district's office of school improvement and curricular programs.

Beginning next year, the district will abandon the remedial course level called "review." Langford-Brown said the largely unstructured courses fed "watered-down" content to primarily black students and have "outlived their value."

The school system is also overhauling the course selection process to get student and parents more involved. That will particularly affect high school students, who are more likely to have teacher recommendations influence their final enrollment decisions.

Dan Peabody, a school counselor at Mount Hebron High School in Ellicott City, said that counselors have become more involved in the course selection process.

They visit classes to tell students what classes are available to them. Teachers make their recommendations, and then counselors and students discuss their recommendations and their goals.

In as many cases as possible, there's also an effort to engage parents. Educators say they are working to close an information gap that puts black and poor students at a disadvantage.

"Somebody has to be able to recognize that a student's potential is beyond what we see on the report card," he said. "And sometimes parents can do that for you, but you really need an ally in the school."

There are challenges at every level, he says.

School counselors have to convince teachers that expanding opportunities for black students doesn't mean changing standards. They have to convince parents that their children's pursuit of rigor will not end in failure. And they have to convince students who have spent years in regular classes that they can succeed in advanced courses.

The last is the hardest, Peabody said.

"It's almost just another form of institutional racism that is seen across the country," he said. "We're not immune to that.

"The hardest thing is to get a person to change their mindset about themselves."

### **Stepping it up at Hammond High**

Marcy Leonard, the principal of Hammond High School, had held assemblies to encourage minority students to take more advanced classes. But it wasn't until about two years ago that she felt she had the credibility to look out over the auditorium full of students of color and be blunt.

"If you identify as black, if you identify as brown, if your family doesn't make a whole lot of money, then it is even more important that you engage in these courses," she recalled telling students.

"Because there are people who look like me who are going to think that you can't, and it is really important that you know that you can."

When Leonard started at the school in 2010, she said, she could easily tell which classes were the regular or remedial ones, because those rooms were full of black and Latino students.

Today, Hammond is one of the high schools that is leading the district's efforts to give more black and other minority students access to higher-level courses — and they're having success. In the past four years, the percentage of minority students enrolling in Advanced Placement courses at Hammond has risen from 30 percent to 45 percent, and the percentage of poor students in those classes has more than doubled.

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**We're battling a culture and mindset of 'Some kids can, and some kids can't.' We're not giving students the opportunities they're entitled to.**

— Renee Foose, superintendent of Howard County schools

As a former AP teacher herself, Leonard knows the pressure to cherry-pick students who could pass the AP exams. And as a longtime educator, Leonard also understands the debate about whether some students are being pushed into classes for which they aren't prepared. Those classes include the high-stakes advanced courses for which students can earn college credit if they can pass an exam.

She vividly remembers the moment when her mindset changed. She was teaching AP government at Columbia's Wilde Lake High School, and one of her black students was struggling. Leonard asked her whether the class was the right fit.

The student told Leonard that she helped her family's business by cleaning offices after school. Even if she got a C, the student said, she felt the class would help prepare her for college.

"I shifted from 'AP is for students who are ready to handle the rigor of college coursework right now,' to 'AP is for students who want to build themselves into the college students they want to become,'"

she said. "And I hope I changed from that point on from a gatekeeper to a gate opener."

When Leonard arrived at Hammond, she brought a program she started at her previous school. Called "Step It Up," it encourages students to push themselves to take one higher-level class each year. She began holding assemblies to rally students behind the idea, showing graphics that linked educational attainment to yearly earnings. She hosted a panel discussion with upperclassmen talking about the benefits of taking higher-level courses.

For the past three years, AP teachers have been meeting monthly after school on their own time to talk about strategies to support minority students in their classes.

"I haven't had to drag teachers along on this journey," she said. "They're active partners because it's the right thing for kids."

When teacher Cherylyn Brown looks out at her regular, predominantly black science classes, she is reminded that there's still work to be done.

"I see one or two Caucasian students, and I know Hammond doesn't look that way," she said. "And I think, 'What's going on?'"

Brown, who is black, tells her black students that they have a stake in increasing representation in higher-level courses.

"I want you to step it up, and go to a higher level, because if you look around, we all look the same," she says. "And that is concerning."

Brown teaches both regular and AP courses. She is the only black AP teacher at Hammond.

Hammond, like other Columbia schools, is experiencing the resegregation that has transformed the core of Howard County over the past two decades. Just four years ago, the student body was 40 percent black and 40 percent white. Today, the black student population remains the same — but the white population has dropped to 27 percent.

The visionary developer James Rouse built Columbia 50 years ago on the ideals of diversity and inclusion. But the planned community has not been immune to the self-segregation that has divided cities and suburbs across the country.

In the past two decades, Columbia has lost many affluent and middle-class families with young children. The city has seen a white flight of families to outer Howard County, where there are single-family homes and little affordable housing. In their place, minority and low-income families from Baltimore and other areas, drawn by Columbia's affordability and vision, have moved into housing complexes.

When it became clear in the early 2000s that housing patterns were threatening Rouse's vision for Columbia, those carrying out his legacy had one source of hope. The schools, said Alton J. Scavo of the Rouse Co., would be the final test.

Leonard doesn't know and doesn't dwell on where the white kids at Hammond went. She focuses instead on where the black kids are. She is guided by an adage from Kenya's Masai people: If you want to know about the health of the community, ask how the children are.

"When I think about that for Hammond, the question is, 'And how are the black children?'" Leonard said. "Because as our black children go at Hammond, so goes the school."

### **Being black in AP**

One morning in February, Leonard invited a group of Hammond High School seniors to a school conference room. They sat around a table and spoke about what it's like to be black in AP courses.

One by one, the students talked about what inspired them to enroll, whether they learned culturally relevant content, what help was available to them once they got in, whether they felt the need to "code switch" — to "act white" — to fit in. Did they find it harder to raise their hands in class — to risk being black *and* wrong?

"I only started taking AP classes this year because I didn't think I was good enough, and now I'm thriving " Mikey said. "I feel like so much time was wasted ... if only someone had told me earlier."

Senior Josh Burrell had been taking advanced courses since middle school.

"I rely on other minorities for help because even though I've known Caucasian students all my life, there's a dissonance," he said.

Senior Victoria Howard said her parents had pushed her to take gifted and talented classes since

elementary school.

"It's hard to participate because you don't want to put yourself out there; you don't want to take risks," she said.

Leonard stood in the back of the room, listening, her back pressed against the wall, her eyes squinting, sometimes closing in long blinks. She is planning to hold a focus group with 100 minority students this year as part of her effort to get more of them into advanced classes. She says these tough conversations are necessary.

"How they're experiencing it is not the way we want them to be experiencing it," she said, adding that it's disappointing. "But it's also real."

She said getting students into higher-level courses is just the beginning. Now she has to figure out how to make them feel they belong.

### **Inside the cocktail party**

This year, as a senior, Mikey Peterson, 17, decided to pursue AP classes. He asked for teacher recommendations for three classes. He got only one recommendation, and signed waivers for the other two classes. He is now in all three.

"I know that the AP setting is where I should be, but where people don't want me to be," he said. "And that's true for a lot of black students. It's kind of sad."

Mikey and Eli now share an AP class. But they say their experiences couldn't be any different.

Mikey, usually a vocal and outgoing teenager, is almost muted in this class, reluctant to raise his hand.

Some of that is because he feels that his classmates have an advantage over him — they have been in advanced courses together most of their high school careers, and they have relationships with the teacher.

But, he says, there's a part of him that feels that what he has to say is less valuable because he is black.

"Whenever I open my mouth, I feel dumb," he said. "I feel like I get swatted aside because a white person could have answered it better."

Eli Sauerwalt, 17, notices that his friend is quieter than others in the class. He says the same about most of his other black classmates. When they speak up, he takes notice.

"If one of those four kids is talking, they know what they're talking about," he says. "They're not going to be disputed."

Class is different for him, he says, because he's white. He has no hesitation about speaking up. Instead, his level of participation in class depends on how awake he is that day.

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**Minorities stick together because you all will have similar experiences. The experiences of feeling less-than, that you have to work a little bit harder to be heard.**

— Josh Burrell, a senior at Hammond High School

Elizabeth Stocklin teaches AP English at Hammond.

On the first day of school, she says, when her 12th-graders walk into her AP English class, the results of 11 years of education are obvious. She can tell the kids who have "been in these rigorous classes since they were in pull-ups," and the ones who've just started in the last year or so.

These divisions don't always fall along racial lines, she says, but she's learning that for her black students who are new to AP, there's an extra level of discomfort.

Stocklin, who is white, says she is happy to see color in her classroom increasing.

When asked if it influences her instruction, she answers, "I hope not."

"I have very shy African-American students in my AP classes, and I think they have a lot of powerful things to say," she said. "I want to make sure they have a stage for that to happen, and that they

don't get lost in the chatter of the cocktail party that's traveled together."

### **Regret, and opportunity**

Howard County didn't begin to integrate its schools until 1964 — 10 years after the Supreme Court ordered desegregation nationwide in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Five years ago, the school board passed a proclamation expressing "profound regret" for maintaining "segregated and unequal public schools both prior, and subsequent to, the 1954 ruling."

The board said it committed "to ensure that each student, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, or socioeconomic status, receives the educational opportunities necessary to ensure the fulfillment of the student's potential and dreams."

But by that measure, students and educators are finding the promises of the Supreme Court and the school board aren't enough.

Some question whether integration is, in fact, the way to create equal opportunity for all.

"If I was white, I feel like I would be spoken to more about the opportunities I have," Mikey said. "I feel like I've missed out on so much."

Eli agrees. He says he has enjoyed hearing his black classmates offer alternative narratives to European history and interpretations of literature. He appreciates being able to sit next to his best friend in class. Integration, he said, "specifically benefits white students a lot."

"In the way that things work now, white students are comfortably being exposed to other narratives that we're not familiar with and given the opportunity to learn from them," Eli said.

Josh Burrell has decided to attend a historically black college next year. He believes that teachers pushing him to take advanced courses helped him secure a full ride to North Carolina A&T, boosted his self-confidence, and taught him how to work alongside people he doesn't always like or feel comfortable with.

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# I'm never going to be the smartest person in the room ... but I'm going to try my damn hardest.

— Mikey Peterson, senior at Hammond High School

But even with all of his opportunity, he said he yearns for the family feel that he remembers from his regular classes.

"Minorities stick together because you all will have similar experiences," he said. "The experiences of feeling less-than, that you have to work a little bit harder to be heard, or work harder to be seen as equal."

Victoria Howard said being in classes with black students made her feel more at ease, but she believes "nothing changes if everyone's just too comfortable."

"Exposing people to being around different kinds of people is how we acclimate and how we change," she said. "And that's important when we leave high school. Because out in the world, you don't get to pick who you're around."

As they get ready to graduate, Mikey and Eli are once again ready to veer off onto different paths.

Eli will take classes at community college. He was accepted at a four-year school, but says he didn't get the financial aid he needed to attend.

"It's not so much that community college is a lesser thing for me," Eli said. "I knew I did the best I could. It just doesn't feel like enough."

Mikey felt embarrassed and envious in the early winter months as his friends' acceptance letters to their top-choice colleges began rolling in. He put on a false smile, wondering if his would come. Even though he wasn't surprised, given some of his past grades, his heart sunk with every rejection letter.

He finally secured admission to [West Virginia University](#) a few weeks ago. It wasn't his first choice. But he believes he's prepared. In two of the AP classes, he's done well, and he has more self-

confidence, more sense of personal responsibility for his future.

"I'm never going to be the smartest person in the room," he said, "but I'm going to try my damn hardest."

Still, without any scholarships, Mikey says he'll be "dangerously in debt" getting himself through college. He might not even be able to afford his AP exams.

He sees himself in his 4- and 5-year-old brothers, who are in prekindergarten and kindergarten. They're outgoing, talkative, active and enthusiastic about homework.

"I hope they get more chances," he said. "Get to go further at a younger age."

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