Despite the Best Intentions:
How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools

Drawing on five years’ worth of interviews and data-gathering at Riverview, a diverse and highly resourced suburban school, we examine how the racial achievement gap persists in American schools more than fifty years after the formal dismantling of segregation. In this talk I address one dynamic often ignored in discussions of racial disparities in education outcomes. Historically, efforts to address the black/white achievement gap have often focused on some version of the question “What’s going on with the black kids?” However, to understand why some aspects of educational outcomes at Riverview are so entrenched, we find that we instead need to ask, “What role do white parents play here?” We show that while white families reported choosing to live in Riverview because they wanted their children to be educated in a diverse community, these same parents’ concerns about making sure their children have every educational advantage means they are often deeply ambivalent about if not explicitly hostile to changing the rules and practices that benefit their children (and disadvantage others). We show that at least one consequence of their cumulative behavior is to reproduce their racial advantage.

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