



SLOW ~~BUT SURE~~ PROGRESS

Education Equity in the Gulf South

BY NIK MITCHELL, PH.D.

Education equity has been a constant issue for the United States since the establishment of the country, and it continues to be a policy and cultural flashpoint deserving of study. Second-class education for African Americans, and by extension all people of color, was not an act of mere happenstance. It was, as James Anderson wrote, “the logical outgrowth of a social ideology designed to adjust black southerners to racially qualified forms of political and economic subordination.”¹ Historically, black education was a major political and policy issue in the United States and was largely shaped by white concerns about how newly freed blacks would be integrated into the national pool of skilled and unskilled labor, how the South would be integrated into the emerging industrialized economy of the 20th century, and how white supremacy would be maintained throughout the country.²

These concerns steered policy creation on a wide range of topics that ranged from the training of black teachers to the curriculum black students received. Subsequently, the education that was imposed upon the black community was designed to produce unskilled and semi-skilled workers through industrial education. To this end, in many states there was an intentional absence of higher education and even secondary education opportunities. These policies also led to the creation of historically black colleges and universities throughout the South for African Americans to provide adequate higher education and professional training, especially for African American teachers, to mitigate the effects of segregated and unequal school systems.

The “separate but equal” doctrine that governed education policy in the United States was later abandoned in the *Brown vs Board of Education* decision in 1954.³ The *Brown* decision ruled that racial segregation in public education was unconstitutional because it deprived students of color of equal educational opportunities and caused demonstrable harm. This was shown at trial court by the Clark doll tests.⁴ With this ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court required states and local governments to provide a quality education to students regardless of race; but this shift in doctrine away from “separate but equal” created an immediate and sustained resistance among policymakers, administrators, and the white public in general. The cumulative effect of this resistance from the past few decades is the slow but proven re-segregation of K-12 education in the United States along lines of race and socioeconomic status.⁵

But what about African American educational attainment? Has the end of the “separate but equal” doctrine increased this crucial metric for a healthy standard of living? This article focuses on African American education rates for adults ages 25 to 100 years old in the Gulf South states of Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas.

The data analyzed here was gathered from the 1970 U.S. census and the 2016 five-year averages (2012-2016) from the U.S. census. Data from 1970 was used because it is the first census collected after the fall of Jim Crow so all adults ages 25 and older in these states would have received their entire education under the “separate but equal” doctrine.⁶ Data from 2016 captured adults who received their education in the post-Brown context as well as older adults who were educated during Jim Crow.⁷

Figure one (opposite page) shows the combined African American educational attainment rates in five Gulf South states as a whole for 1970 and the five-year averages for 2016. According to U.S. census data from 1970 and the 2016 five-year averages, there has been a pronounced shift in African American educational attainment in the Gulf South states as a whole. In 1970, only 9.09 percent of African Americans had attended university, and another 14.48 percent had completed high school. Over three quarters—76.43 percent—of Gulf South African Americans had less than a high school education in 1970. In 2016, the less than high school education rate had contracted to 15.16 percent, while both the rates for high school completion and some college and above had increased to 40.25 percent and 44.59 percent respectively. Comparatively, the less than high school rate shrank by 61.27 percentage points.

Figure two (opposite page) shows African American educational attainment in each Gulf South state in 1970 and the five-year averages for 2016. According to U.S. census data from 1970 and the 2016 five-year averages, in each of the five Gulf South states African American educational attainment increased from 1970 to 2016. The largest drop in rates of less than a high school education from 1970 to 2016, 64.93 percentage points, occurred in Mississippi. The greatest increase in rates of some college and above, 41.62 percentage points, occurred in Texas.

The data show that ending Jim Crow segregation had a discernible affirmative impact on African American educational rates in the Gulf South states due to increased access to secondary and post-secondary education that followed the *Brown* decision.

Education is a basic human right. This is affirmed by both Catholic social teaching⁸ and in article 26 section 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, of which the United States is a signatory. While education equity between the races is still a pressing issue, data show that the end of the “separate but equal” doctrine had a positive impact on African American educational attainment.

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Figure 1: African American Educational Attainment in the Gulf South States Combined for Ages 25-100, 1970 vs. 2016

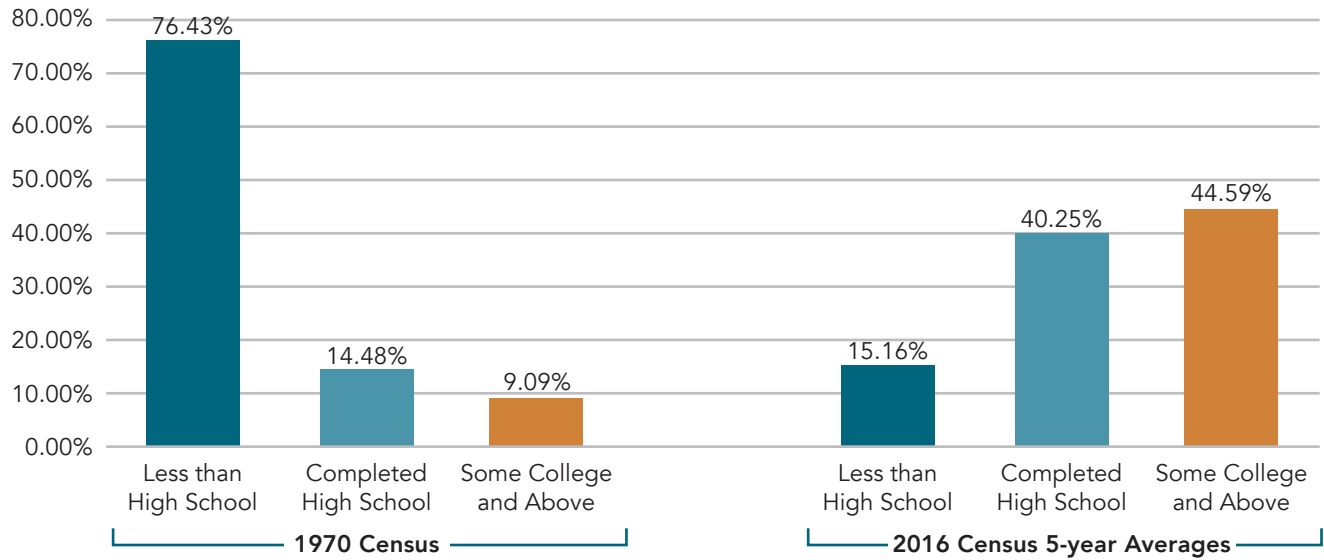
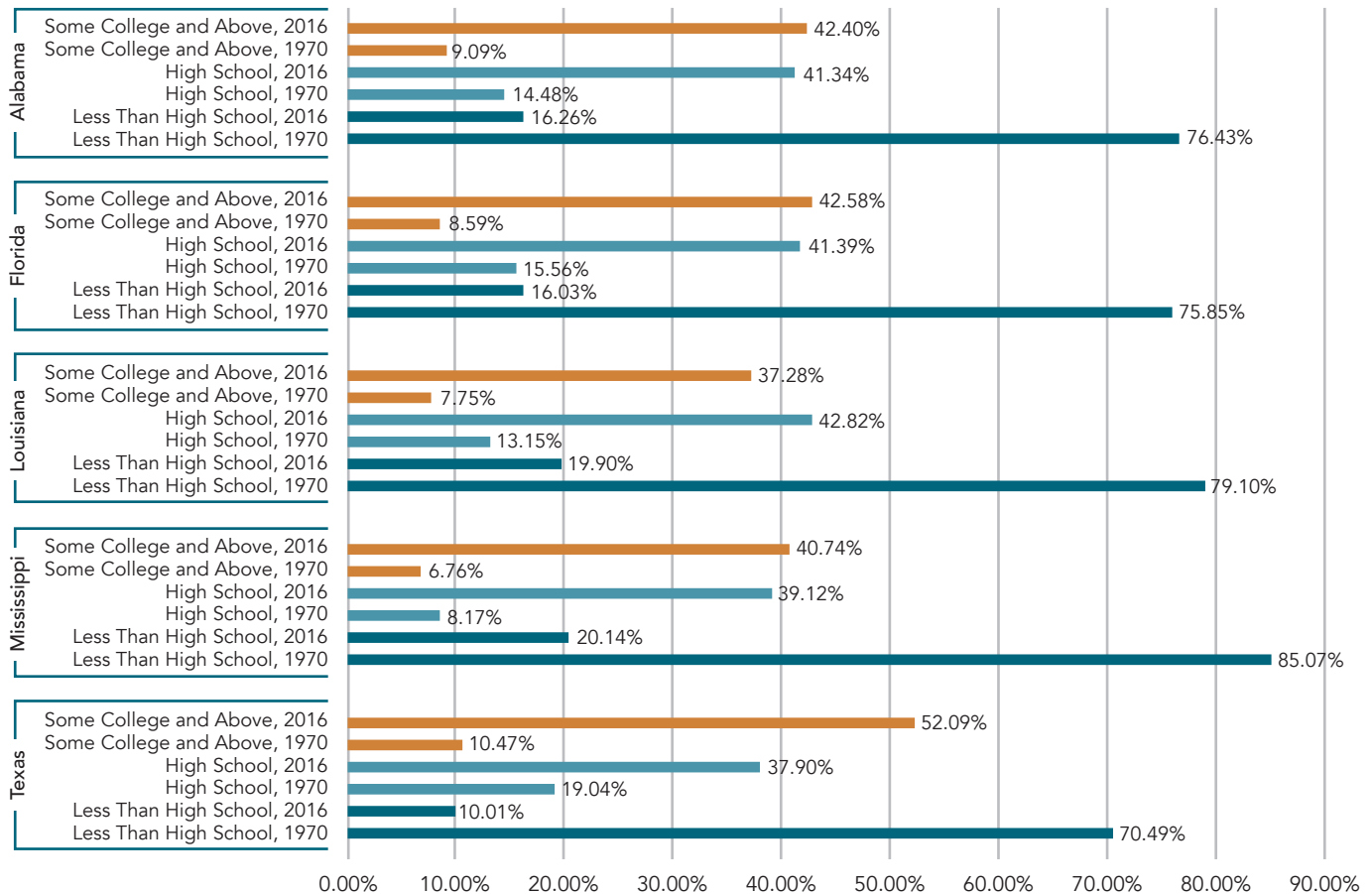


Figure 2: African American Educational Attainment by Gulf South State Ages 25-100, 1970 vs. 2016



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