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Optional Program: Barriers to Black Student  
Enrollment in Shelby County Schools**

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Examining the Shelby County Schools Optional Program:  
Barriers to Black Student Enrollment in AP/Honors  
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Abstract

Memphis has a long-standing history of segregation, most notably within its school system. The struggle to achieve an equitable education has been interrupted by issues of white flight, busing, school privatization, cultural competency, and so on. Segregation in Memphis's schools can be boiled down to many issues; however, this paper will be taking a closer examination of the Shelby County Schools Optional Program and locating the barriers to black student enrollment in AP/Honors classes within its system. The lack of discussion around the necessity of optional schools and its role in perpetuating barriers to black student enrollment in AP/Honors classes is alarming. This paper will expand on the national dilemma of magnet and optional schools and AP courses, and will situate Memphis in the middle of this national debate. By reflecting on the history of optional schools in Memphis, expertise of SCS officials, and the lived experienced of both teacher and student, there is hope that conversations about the Optional Program and educational equity for black students will begin.

The inequity of education in Memphis has yet to be resolved; moreover, Memphis's longstanding attempts to solve inequity have further produced problems of its own. Attempts to solve segregation in Memphis schools since the 1960s, have set off a chain reaction of policy solutions that have perpetuated the very issue needing correction. The struggle to achieve an equitable education has been interrupted by issues of white flight, busing, and school privatization, all stemming from a continued investment in segregation. In this research, the implementation and effects of the Optional Program as a solution to desegregation will be evaluated. The Optional Program in Memphis has created a school within a school system, in which students can participate in more advanced and challenging coursework. With that said the Optional Program has also created a within school segregation with a lack of African American and socioeconomically disadvantaged students participating in the program. To access the barriers to black student enrollment in AP/Honors in Shelby County Schools, one must evaluate the Optional Program. With interviews of individuals from the SCS Board, teachers, students, and parents of White Station, this research will place Memphis in context with the national debate over magnet school and AP programs. By exploring one of the most prestigious schools in Shelby County, White Station High School, this research will attempt to evaluate what specific barriers prevent black students from enrolling in AP/Honors, and the purposefulness of magnet school programs and AP/Honors classes.

### **Origins of the Optional Program**

In order to get at the purpose of the Optional Program, one must consider the historical context. The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision attempted to uproot the foundation set for inequitable education amongst black and white students. However, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, declaring "separate but equal" had deep roots in the South. In Memphis

tradition, schools moved quite slower than “with all deliberate speed” (*Brown v. Board of Educ.*, 1954). The state of Tennessee and the Memphis Board of Education underwent battles of litigation, especially with the rise of tensions within the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Desegregation of schools with the use of litigation that sought to eliminate a dual-race school system and court-ordered busing produced rejection of integration from white parents (Kiel, 2008).

Court-ordered busing heavily influenced the rise of white flight and private schools in Memphis. Court-ordered busing, ultimately came down to Plan A and Plan Z. According to the work of Marcus Pohlmann (2008) in *Opportunity Lost: Race and Poverty in the Memphis City Schools*, Plan A began implementation January 24, 1973, busing 10,000 to 13,000 students, requiring forty-two buses (p. 74). Plan Z was devised for the 1973-74 school year, using two-way busing to desegregate, and would bus nearly 40,000 Memphis students (Pohlmann, 2008, p. 76). Both plans proved unsuccessful due to white parent’s reluctance to have their children bused. Many white families moved from the city to the suburbs to combat busing. Of course, this white flight was also influenced by other factors like taxes, cost of living, and the movement of black folk into white neighborhoods. As a result, white flight to the suburbs directly affected the classroom. Reflecting on the correlation between the demographic of Memphis and Memphis schools with the emergence of white flight, Pohlmann (2008) examined that “the numbers of white students dropped from 71,369 in 1973 to 27,173 by 1980 (p.82)”. However, white flight as residential segregation was not the only problem preventing integration.

White flight to private schools also expanded from the opposition to court-ordered busing. Even before the implementation of Plan Z, “there were soon 100 private educational options within the Memphis city limits, in a city that had roughly 170 public schools. Private

school enrollment nearly doubled, increasing by more than 14,000 students between 1972 and 1973” (Pohlmann, 2008, p. 83). Groups opposing busing, such as Citizens Against Busing (CAB) and Frayser Against Busing began opening CAB or private schools. However, these schools began to fail with the lack of resources as accredited public schools in Memphis. As the number of CAB schools dwindled, they were replaced with religious and secular private schools (Pohlmann, 2008, p. 83). For white Memphians who could not afford to move to the suburbs, they sought out private schools as another means of white flight from integration.

To combat white flight and attempt to strengthen integration, Memphis City Schools adopted the Optional Program. Beginning in 1976, there were only four optional schools, and since then it has grown substantially. The Optional Program was designed to “provide attractive educational alternatives and have allowed the city’s public schools to compete with area private schools for some of the most talented students available” (Pohlmann, 2008, p. 88). Optional schools were implemented with the hope of retaining some of the white students who participated in the white flight to private schools. The Optional Program did retain white and black students lost to private schools or the suburbs; however, Memphis City Schools did not achieve the large number lured away. Memphis was not the first city to implement a school design intended to integrate by attracting white students.

Optional schools, commonly known as magnet schools, began popping up across the United States for the same purpose Memphis set out for. In *A Desegregation Tool That Backfired: Magnet Schools and Classroom Segregation*, Kimberly West (1994) says, “The first magnet schools drew their themes from specialty schools such as the Bronx School of Science, Boston Latin School, and Lane Tech in Chicago, adopting areas of specialization such as science, mathematics, and performing arts” (p. 2569). Schools like this began emerging in cities

all over the nation under different names like “alternative schools” or “schools of choice.” In 1975, the *Morgan v. Kerrigan* decision had determined that the federal courts would accept magnet schools as a method of desegregation (Goldring & Claire, 2002, p. 13). Although, magnet schools were being introduced during a period of school choice, it was through the racial atmosphere caused by court-ordered desegregation that magnet schools were able to gain political support. Mostly located in urban school, “by 1991-92 school year, more than 1.2 million students were enrolled in magnet schools in 230 school districts. During the 1999-2000 school year there were more than 1,372 magnet schools across the United States” (Goldring & Claire, 2002, p. 13). Schools with an Optional Program continue to serve the same purpose of attracting students for the enhancement of racial diversity and academic performance with an advanced curriculum. Although the Optional Program has attempted to maintain racial diversity and high academic performance, whether the process is equitable is to be determined.

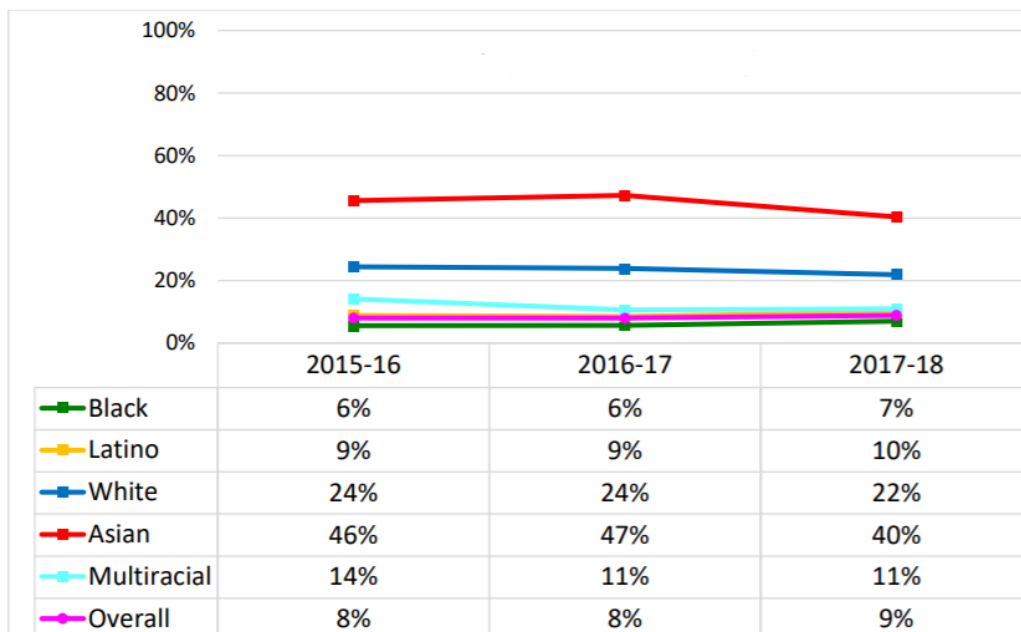
### **The Optional Program**

What is now SCS is the result of the consolidation of Memphis City Schools and Legacy Shelby County Schools that took place in 2013. The 2014 de-merger was the secession of six suburban towns: Arlington, Bartlett, Collierville, Germantown, Lakeland, and Millington. The Optional Program only exists in SCS. The Optional Program in SCS encompasses many other qualities besides academically advanced programs. The programs of the 46 optional schools consist of Transportation-Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (T-STEM); College Prep; International Baccalaureate (IB); Dual Language Immersion; Montessori; Global Health Studies; Creative and Performing Arts; Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM); Engineering; International Studies; Information Technology and other programs. Therefore, AP/Honors are not restricted to optional schools; however, the advanced

courses that optional schools offer can be set apart from the traditional public schools. For traditional public schools that offer AP or other forms of advanced courses, there is oftentimes a smaller variety of courses to choose from. The lack of advanced courses in traditional public schools is a problem in itself. AP, IB, Dual Enrollment, and Honors are courses with advanced curriculum that black students often find difficult to find entry in traditional public schools. For this study of the Optional Program, seeking entrance into the optional schools as a whole is quite difficult for poor black students.

The barriers faced by African American students in traditional schools can be difficult to surmount because the lack of available advance placement classes. There is no doubt that there is a lack of black students enrolled in AP/Honors in traditional public schools in SCS. Figure 1 displays the participation in AP classes by race and ethnicity in all SCS from the 2015-16 to 2017-18 school year (Garrison, 2018). From this data, Asians are seen to participate in AP courses significantly more than other racial groups in SCS.

Figure 1. AP Participation Rates by Race/Ethnicity in SCS



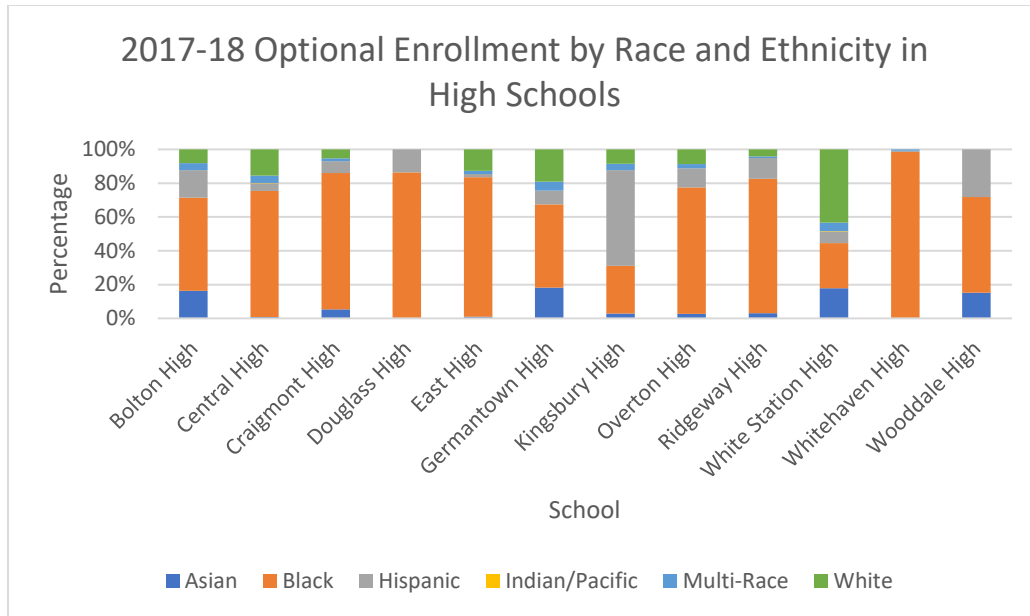


Black students in the past three years have tended to participate in AP courses the least. In both optional and traditional public schools there is a lack of black participation in AP courses.

Although, traditional public schools may not offer as many AP courses, black students aren't the students taking them. Black participation is significantly low for a city that is majority black. However, addressing black student enrollment in the SCS Optional Program may give insight into how the barriers should be corrected.

The Optional Program has produced some inequities primarily for students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. However, the link between race and poverty in Memphis is distressing, disproportionately creating these inequities of economic disadvantage for black people. The poverty rate in Memphis is ranked amongst the highest in the United States, being 27.6%, and the child poverty rate is 44.7%. For the city of Memphis, the poverty rate of non-Hispanic black people is 32.3% (Delavega, 2017). Although black students make up the majority of students in SCS schools, it does not mean the inequity goes away. Figure 2 displays the 2017-18 optional enrollment by race and ethnicity in the optional high schools. According to the Division of Optional Schools Statistics 2017-18, 65.99% of optional school enrollment, including elementary and middle school is black (SCS, 2018). Inequity for poor black students are still carried out in these programs. Although, the numbers reflect a larger number of black students compared to other races, compared to the number of black students in the school, there isn't enough exposure to AP/Honors for black students. Low numbers of black students participating in the optional program are due to an inequitable registration process and the restrictions set by school entrance requirements.

Figure 2. 2017-18 Optional Enrollment by Race and Ethnicity in High Schools



### Optional School Registration

The introduction of the Optional Program had sparked a great deal of popularity amongst Memphis families. The Optional Program began while in MCS, and at the time parents were lining up at the doors of the school board in order to register their children for the Optional Program. A Commercial Appeal article as early as 1991, discussed the “camp-out Thursday at the Memphis Board of Education auditorium, where parents held roll calls to make sure people were retaining their place in line. Some of the 27 optional schools are so popular that children are turned away” (Reel, 1991). Although, there was a fewer number of optional schools at the time, the camp-out at the school board could disproportionately affect the economically disadvantaged. For 1991 parent camper, Melissa Baker, “Friday, she said she signed up two of her children for Colonial Junior High's program in performing arts. She doesn't like the signup process much, saying it's tough to spend most of the night at the school board. She and her husband split the duty” (Reel, 1991). The very same thoughts and feelings toward the registration process were

still the same over twenty years ago, as they were before the registration for optional schools went online in January of 2018.

Camping out in order to register students for the Optional Program is still fresh in the minds of many parents who have waited outside the doors of the school board. For the 2017-18 school year, Laura Kebede (2017) covered the parent camp-out before the introduction of the online application. In recent years, applying for optional schools was created to fill 80 percent of slots by first come, first-serve and lottery made up the other 20 percent. However, the result of the “first-come, first-serve approach created a monster in the form of “tent city,” a days-long campout every January on the lawn of the district’s central office, preventing parents with inflexible schedules from signing their kids up” (Kebede, 2017). Years of camping out have produced negative impacts for students. According to the Tennessee State Report Card, for the 2016-17 school year 58.6% of students enrolled in all SCS were economically disadvantaged of 109,664 students in SCS in all (TN Department of Education). In the city of Memphis, race and socioeconomic status are closely tied together. 29.2% of African Americans living in Shelby County live below poverty, and white people are nearly three times less at a rate of 8.3% (Delavega, 2017). The socioeconomic disparity between black and white students have affected their ability to even apply for optional schools.

Students who have the capability to enroll in advance programs in optional schools are denied that due to their socioeconomic status and privileges they are not allotted. In an interview with a white parent enrolling their child in White Station Middle School, Andrew Flint reflected on his privileges camping out at three in the morning. He had a flexible job schedule, came from an affluent family, is treated a particular way because of his profession, and his children get excellent standardized test scores (personal communication, July 13, 2018) For Flint, the

difficulty of registering his student during campouts were significantly reduced compared to a poor black parent. According to Tosha Downey of Memphis Education Fund, the privileged are the first who come "...and poor families cannot do that, no matter how brilliant their children are" (Kebede, 'Tent city' is ending in Memphis. Will online admissions to prized schools be fairer?, 2017). It is unfortunate that these tent cities and parent campouts have lasted as long as they have. However, the introduction of an online application was created to reduce these inequities.

When registration for optional schools went online January of 2018, relief had filled many parents who had once stood outside the doors of SCS. Moving the application online was a way to promote equity for those families that could not camp-out for registration. Concerns about how equitable the application would be online with the reality that many homes in Memphis did not have access to Internet. To address problems of inequity, SCS has designed the online application to be mobile-friendly and has opened computer stations at SCS Welcome Center, SCS Coe Auditorium, SCS Grays Creek Administration Office, SCS Northeast Regional Office, all SCS schools, and public libraries (Kebede, 2018). Optional school parent Flint has said that the online registration has been easy to use and easily accessible (personal communication, July 13, 2018). The barrier of registration had gone on for decades with the camping out of parents to enroll their children in optional schools; therefore, the move to have an online application is a good move in the right direction. Director of the Division of Optional Schools and Advanced Academics, Linda Sklar, when asked about the transition to online said, "The online application process improved the equity and access of Optional Programs, as it does for General Choice. As of July [2018], Optional Programs received 3100 more applications than in prior years due to the broadened opportunity to apply" (personal communication, July 19,

2018). The online registration is quite new for SCS; therefore, it will be interesting to see how the inequity gap may close. However, barriers for poor and working-class parents find internet access and time a barrier for registration. Although strides have been made to decrease the inequity gap for parents to register their students, the question remains how inequity is operating based on the requirements set by the optional schools themselves.

### **Entrance Requirements**

The SCS Optional Program allows for every optional school to set their own requirements for entrance into the program. The entrance requirements for students to enroll in optional schools can have a serious impact on whether or not a student can attend an optional school or be enrolled in an Optional Program. Entrance requirements pertaining to test scores on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) or other acceptable achievement tests, conduct grades, attendance and tardiness have been key components to barriers denying black students to optional programs. According to Linda Sklar, “Entrance requirements are determined through extensive meetings and discussions with the school communities (parents, students, faculty, community representatives, industry representatives where applicable, and central office representatives), tailoring those requirements to the type of program being offered at the school” (personal communication, July 19, 2018). Requirements for optional programs within a school can have different requirement based on the programs within them. For example, Bolton High School has an IB Program and an Automotive Technology program. For the IB Program students are required to score at or above the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile on the TCAP, but for the Automotive Technology program students are required to score at or above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile (SCS, 2018, p. 55). The difference between these requirements are based off the academic performance that the school demands of its students, as it is seen in Bolton’s IB Program. For the

purpose of discovering the barriers to AP/Honors enrollment, the IB Program requirements at Bolton would be considered.

In regard to policy governing the SCS Optional Program, there really is none. A former policy director for SCS and now Executive Director of Whole Child Strategies, Natalie McKinney stated on the topic of the missing policy influence from before and after the merger “I saw the inequity of it, right? And so, I fought very hard, in just looking at it and my children being a part of it, wondering one why it looked the way it did still. And two, why the board had not really taken any ownership of the process” (personal communication, July 19, 2018). McKinney was unsure as to why there had not been policy from the school board for such an accelerated program, when there was such a need for it. According to Commissioner Kevin Woods, who was elected during the merger-demerger situation, believed the opportunity to rebrand and restructure the Optional Program was missed during the time of the merger. The merger provided a moment for policy to be incorporated into the structure of optional schools; however, the opportunity was not taken. The exclusion of policy may be due to the desire of the community and district to maintain the status quo, perpetuating segregation by schools and within schools. Although, there has been talk around the need of restructure, whether or not that needs to be done using policy, is still to be determined.

### **Test Scores and Tracking.**

Academic differentiation usually begins in elementary schools. For White Station Elementary, there is no Optional Program; however, they do have a CLUE program. Creative Learning in a Unique Environment or CLUE is designed for students who exemplify academically gifted and talented abilities. In these programs, students participate in critical thinking, problem solving, and other unique qualities. Programs like these feed into the Optional

Program. Amanda Lewis and John Diamond (2015) in an examination of a school in Illinois stated, “Academic differentiation begins in the elementary schools, and some of the school dynamics that can generate academic skill hierarchies begin then. But these skill gaps get exacerbated at the high school level” (p. 85). This is definitely true for the Optional Program in SCS. All optional high schools are a school-within-a-school structure, causing students who may have been together for their elementary and middle school experience, are now separated into their tracks. Although, White Station Elementary is not an optional school, it starts students on a track to participate in optional programs. The optional school, Brewster Elementary, requires that first and second grade students score in the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile or above on the Optional Schools admittance tests (SCS, 2018, p. 56). Primary optional school programs help to groom students for a secondary education in the Optional Program. The academic hierarchies are being established in schools with gifted and talented or optional programs beginning at the elementary level.

For the requirements, optional schools often use the TCAP or other achievement assessments like the ACT or PSAT. White Station High School requires that a student score in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile or higher on the TCAP to be enrolled in its Optional Program. The score required to enroll in White Station High School’s Optional Program appears significantly higher when compared to other optional schools. Figure 3 displays the minimum required percentile on the TCAP for honors programs in SCS optional schools. This does not incorporate the minimum required percentile for other programs within these optional schools. The question that arises from this data is how does these varying scores prevent some black students from enrolling in the Optional Program? According to Figure 4, the attendance of all optional schools in SCS are made up of a majority of minority students. For the 2016-17 school year White Station was

Figure 3. Minimum Required Percentile on the TCAP for Honors Programs in SCS Optional High Schools

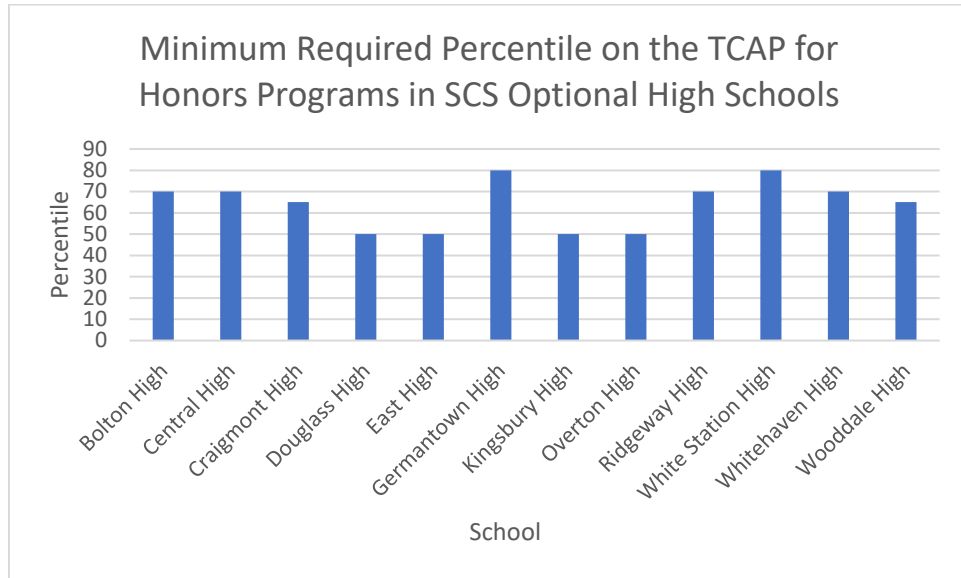
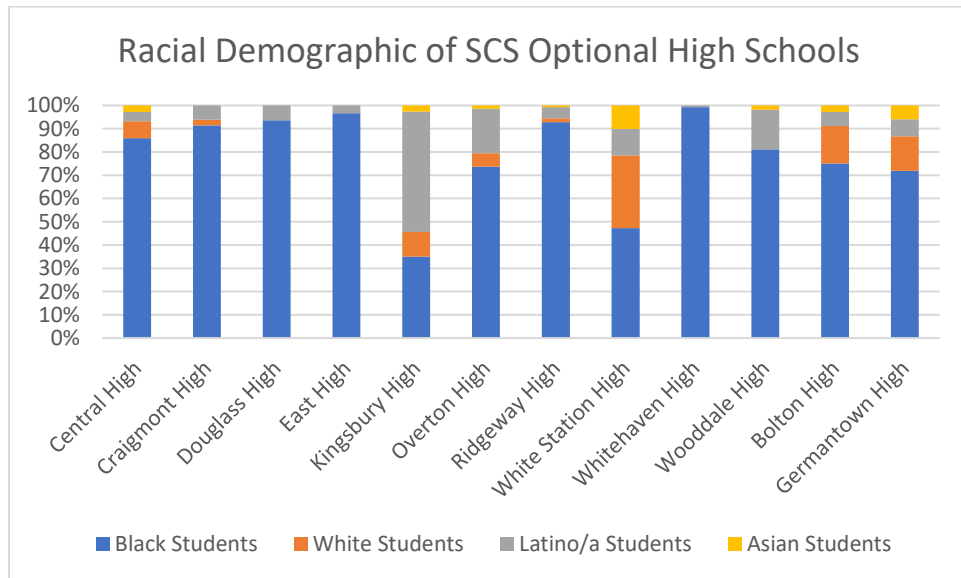


Figure 4. Racial Demographic of SCS Optional High Schools for the 2016-17 School Year





46.9% black, 31% white, 11.3% Hispanic, and 9.9% Asian. From interviews with parents, teachers, and students, all examined a disparity in the Optional Program, in which white and Asian students made up the majority.

After talking to White Station parents and students, some remarked about the rivalry between Whitehaven and White Station high schools. Laura Burkley, a traditional student enrolled at White Station High School, took some optional courses with an additional push from her mother toward school administration. Burkley was in the Optional Program in elementary and middle school; however, she did not meet the required percentile to enter White Station High School's Optional Program. Burkley could have attended another optional high school with her score, but she was zoned to White Station (personal communication, July 13, 2018). Students aren't afforded certain opportunities because of where they are zoned, and also because who is in charge of setting these standards. Many parents in Memphis come to enroll their student in White Station High School, although they have an optional school in their neighborhood. However, the test requirements are lower, and the percentage of black students are higher. The "elite" attend White Station's Optional Program, and that so happens to be white and Asian students. Therefore, some student may not attend optional schools for other schools because of zoning, for the sake of not being with the most elite, or the fear of being with black students reducing the high academic scores.

Private testing has also had a hand in the lack of black students and increasing the numbers of white affluent students in the Optional Program. There is very little information on private testing for sake of keeping it underground. Parent, Andrew Flint put it this way:

This is an underground thing among white people, and I knew about it. So, you need test scores, [or] IQ score? I know of many white parents, they're white kids

parents one-hundred percent. It's not even Asian kid's parents, white kid's parents who are nice kids, that my kids go to school with, [that] didn't get the score that they need to make sure they got into White Station Middle School. At that point it was kind of the place that everyone wanted to go and its changed a little bit. So, there's a guy who does private testing, everyone knows who he is. You go to the guy, you get your kid tested, you get that score—I'm not saying that people cheat but I am saying that—and you get the best score. Your kid's in. And you pay for that. And it's known who to go to get your kid's score. Now who else has access to that? (personal communication, July 13, 2018).

Flint reported that this was how it was done eight years ago; however, he has still seen it operating today. According to Commissioner Woods, governing district four of SCS and unincorporated areas of East Memphis, there is no policy limiting the number of private tests taken (personal communication, July 14, 2017). The question that Flint left also connects to who can afford to private test and who has the privilege of knowing about these networks. For poor families, it is less likely for them to know about where to privately test, let alone afford to take them. White and affluent families can, and those are the students who dominate Optional Programs.

### **Conduct Grades.**

The Optional Program was designed to attract white and affluent students with advance curriculums. Unfortunately, smart students have become synonymous with good students who rarely have behavioral problems. Behavior as referenced by the 2018-19 SCS Handbook can determine the admittance of a student or whether a student can remain in the Optional Program after entrance. From a study of Riverview High School in Illinois, researchers stated, “The

application of consequences to school misbehavior is ‘less a discrete event than a complex process,’ influenced by school policy and by the various parties involved (e.g., students, teachers, administration, parents)” (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 46). Student behavior is decided upon by several groups of people. Therefore, the decision to label a student’s behavior as satisfactory or unsatisfactory can often be unpredictable given all the variables involved.

Often what becomes a part of the behavior discussion, especially in urban settings, is the discipline of black students in particular. National conversation about race and school discipline is observed frequently through topics on the pipeline to prison and the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates of black students (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 47). For students seeking entrance into the Optional Program, less than a suspension can prevent students from enrolling. For many of the optional primary schools in Shelby County, the entrance requirements demand that students “have satisfactory conduct on the most recent report card (SCS, 2018)”. So, what does this mean for students who have experienced behavior problems with unsatisfactory conduct with the capability to perform at an academically advanced level? Although, it may be an entirely new school year students are judged by their past behaviors, not acknowledging the academic talent these students bring forth.

Unfortunately for many black students, they have fewer opportunities to make mistakes before leading to unsatisfactory behavior or worse disciplinary actions. Amanda Lewis and John Diamond (2015) introduce differential selection, being “institutional practices that might lead minorities to get picked out for wrongdoing more often than their white colleagues, despite similar levels of misbehaving” as well as differential processing as “institutional practices that might lead minorities, once singled out for wrongdoing, to receive different sanctions for similar transgressions” (p.46). Black students in SCS have an alarmingly larger number of suspensions.

For the 2016-17 school year, the suspension rate for black students was 17.5% with a total of 14,816 suspensions for all of SCS. The rate for white students was 5.0%, making up the smallest suspension rate behind Asians at 2.3% (TN Department of Education). Although, black students make up the majority of students in SCS, the number of suspensions for black students is still overrepresented.

Not only does discipline act as a barrier to entrance, but it takes on different forms in the separation between optional and traditional. Although this can be true, an interview with parents and students of White Station discuss the ways in which traditional students are targeted for behavioral problems. In interviews with the optional and traditional students, all participants discussed the targeting of traditional students when it came to discipline. For optional student Jazmine Vice, she was able to locate her privilege in the Optional Program when it came to discipline even though she was a black student. Whereas students in the Optional Program were targeted for the same offenses optional students got away with, such as dress code or disruptive behavior. The optional students were aware of their own privileges and are given more opportunities to make mistakes. For 2016-17, there were 1,022 black students attending White Station High School (TN Department of Education, n.d.). With data from the SCS Division of Optional Schools Statistics 2017-18, there are only 277 black students in the optional program at White Station High School. White students for 2016-17 was 676, with 451 enrolled in the optional program at White Station High School. Although, the data is off by one year, it shows how disproportionate black and white enrollment in the Optional Program compared to enrollment in the school. According to the data, black students make up the majority of students in traditional classrooms. Based on the reflections of students, many of the traditional classes are filled with black students, making them the target for differential processing.

Discipline is highly influential for traditional student mobility into optional classrooms. According to optional student, Briana Lewis, being black and a traditional student made it difficult to move into optional classes. Lewis stated,

When kids wanted to get into the honors classes and stuff like that, they'd go to the guidance counselors. And they would basically review how you've been doing in your other classes to see if your able to keep up with the honors kids. So, some people would go in there. They will be smart as ever, but they will be the troublemakers. So, they would already shut them down, and of course I'm talking about the black students. The white kids would probably, nine times out of ten, get a pass. They didn't ask any questions. They didn't go to the teachers about it. They just automatically put it in the system based on their GPA, even though they probably had drugs on campus or they skip a lot (personal communication, July 15, 2018).

Black students in traditional classes find mobility into the Optional Program difficult and become the targets of differential selection. Although, there are black and white traditional students, there is a great chance of mobility present for white students. Even though, the intent behind the conduct grades may not be to directly target black and traditional students, stereotypes made about both black and traditional students can prevent access later down the line into optional programs.

### **Tardiness/Absences.**

In addition to satisfactory conduct, students in the Optional Program must have satisfactory "attendance records, including promptness to school and to each class, with no more

than 15 absences and/or tardies” (SCS, 2018). All SCS optional schools have this same requirement, and many other SCS have the same policy. However, tardies play a large role of preventing access to optional programs. According to White Station High School 2017-18 Discipline Plan, “Attendance related infractions (tardiness/ excessive absences) are most referred incidents 48% (751) of all referrals” (WSHS, 2017). Referrals are given after five or more tardies. Although, 15 absences and/or tardies appears to be enough room for some possible absences and tardies to arise, for many socioeconomically disadvantaged students or out of district students it may not. And five tardies are definitely not enough room to keep students from getting disciplinary referrals, affecting their conduct.

From a socioeconomic perspective, achieving less than five tardies can be difficult. According to McKinney who has worked in law regarding child delinquency, truancy, and long-term suspension, “To punish a child academically for a, what they like to call a soft skill issue, is deplorable...if you’re concerned about soft skills or people getting to class on time then you need to have a requisite for punishment for that issue or deterrent for that issue” (personal communication, July 19, 2018). A student zoned to an optional school can be kicked out due to attendance or tardies; however, they can remain at the school, continuing to experience the same amount of tardies and absences. Teachers of White Station High School’s Optional Program have made it clear that attendance in their classrooms are important in order to keep up the pace. However, tardiness is not the same as being absent. For some students, tardiness is in the hand of the parent, and students are the ones punished for their actions. In that case, the student’s tardiness or absence is not a reflection of the student’s soft skills but of the parents.

From conversations with students and parents, targeting of traditional students to act within school policy was addressed. Jazmine Vice talked about her privilege as an optional

student as opposed to her traditional student, both attending White Station. When asked about discipline between optional and traditional students, Vice stated,

My sister was in traditional and she actually got put on probation for tardies...

And our issue with that was me and my sister get to school at the same time. So, what is the difference from when I get to class, and my teacher doesn't mark me tardy, but these traditional teachers are like tardy, tardy, tardy. At the end of the day I think optional students get privilege (personal communication, July, 13, 2018).

Again, the works of privilege are operating here. Traditional students continue to be targeted for disciplinary offenses, which can greatly contribute to their mobility into the Optional Program. These two White Station students were out of district, and their mom had to get them to school, which gives reason as to why they may have been late. This does not even include other factors that may contribute to their tardies or absences that may occur. The percentage of referrals for absences and tardies given by White Station High School are quite high, and given the strict optional requirements of White Station, those absences and/or tardies probably stem from the traditional students. This is especially true if traditional teachers are enforcing the rules stronger than optional teachers. The more traditional students receiving disciplinary referrals the less likely they can enter the Optional Program.

### **AP Courses in the Optional Program**

At White Station, the Optional Program is designed in a way that within the Optional Program, there are two levels: one is the optional or honors classes, and the second is AP classes. After talking with student Laura, the distinction between the honors classes and the traditional

classes is slim. In the rare case for traditional student, Laura Burkley, she participated in a half-half system that her and an interviewed teacher of White Station admitted was very rare. For Burkley, having experiences in both the Optional Program and traditional classes said, “But a lot of people are making like way better grades than the people that are in the optional courses” (personal communication, July 13, 2018). Burkley admitted that AP courses are more challenging, but why bar students from the Optional Program if they are performing at the same level as some optional students. This is a way to cast distinctions amongst students.

Although, it is rare for students in traditional courses to move into the Optional Program for honors classes, it can be even harder to move into AP courses. Students in the traditional program are limited to two optional courses, and this is again based on test scores. However, for traditional student to take AP courses, Students are evaluated independently of their position in the Optional Program. Although, students can apply for as many AP classes as they would like, but test scores are considered. In addition to test scores, White Station looks at grades, teacher recommendations, and prior performance in AP classes (N. McKinney, personal communication, July 19, 2018). The process to enroll in AP classes are more extensive for students in traditional classes. In an interview with White Station teacher, Micheal Waters, when asked about traditional students mobility into AP classes, “If you want to move into the honors program next year, you’re going to have to be the exceptional student. You’re going to have to be the student that the teacher notices in a good way” (personal communication, July 17, 2018). A student trying to get into AP classes is going to have to put forth even more effort, although they may be an excellent student and did not get the require test score.

For the state of Tennessee, one of the requirements that began in 2017-18 included in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for school and district accountability is an “indicator of



school quality and student success.” One of the indicators was the Ready Graduate Indicator (for high schools) in which a Ready Graduate meets one of the following criteria:

- Score a 21 or higher on the ACT
- Complete four early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs)
- Complete two EPSOs + earn an industry certification (on a CTE pathway leading to a credential)
- Complete 2 EPSOs + score a designated score TBD on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) (TN Department of Education, n.d.).

The Ready Graduate Indicator “measures the percentage of students who are earning a diploma from a Tennessee high school and who have met measures of success that increase their probability of seamlessly enrolling in postsecondary education and entering the workplace or the military” (TN Department of Education, n.d.). The Ready Graduate Indicator does not demand that students pass postsecondary opportunities or AP courses; however, exposure to AP courses are limited to students to restrictive requirements set by optional schools. Cost of the AP exam for poor students, also make criteria for the Ready Graduate difficult to complete. Although, the fee can be reduced, price is a barrier for many economically disadvantaged students. Exposure to AP programs could be an effective way to prepare students into multiple paths; however, students, especially in traditional classes are subjected to more extensive processes.

### **Examining the Necessity of Magnet Schools and AP/Honors**

The presence of magnet schools and AP/Honors courses have been around for quite some time. However, recently cities across the United States are reexamining the need for programs

like these. Magnet schools and AP programs were created to serve a specific population, but policy makers and program organizers have rebranded the purpose of magnet school and AP programs. Unfortunately, they have not restructured the way it operates. Magnet school and AP programs have largely benefited white and Asian affluent families, but there has yet to be a significant turnaround for black and brown students. The national conversation around the necessity of programs like these can better situate Memphis in the context of the SCS Optional Program and the lack of black students in AP/honors classes.

### **Purposefulness of Magnet Schools**

National discussion has been circulating around the purposefulness of magnet schools and AP/Honors classes. Expanding the scope of the research from the Memphis perspective outward helps to situate better SCS in this national discussion. Reflecting on the history of optional school, in which its first purpose was to promote school desegregation by attracting white and affluent students lost to private and suburban schools. However, magnet schools across the country operate as a school-within-a-school, segregated the students based on advanced students and traditional students. Due to the systematic coupling of race and socioeconomic status, black students and Latinx students make up the traditional classes. Magnet schools often use more intensified levels of tracking that begins the separation of students. Although, the intent of separation in the school-within-a-school model is supposed to support the idea of diversity in learning, traditional and minority students get the short end of the stick.

Although many parents wish to stand in support of equitable education, no one wants to sacrifice their child's education for the sake of justice for poor black and brown students. One New York parent, Nicole Hannah-Jones, was willing to be an accomplice. Hannah-Jones is an investigating reporter who covers the way racial segregation in schools is maintained through

official action and policy. When consider where to send her own daughter, Hannah-Jones stated, middle-class neighbors, black or white “had managed to secure seats in the more diverse and economically advantaged magnet schools or gifted-and talented programs outside our area, or opted to pay hefty tuition to progressive but largely white private institutions” (Hannah-Jones, 2016) However, she chose to send her daughter to one of the surrounding majority black and Latinx schools in New York. Hannah-Jones has gotten plenty of backlash for her decision to send her child to poorer schools with her ability to send her child to many other schools in the city. However, Hannah-Jones is acting out her beliefs. Magnet schools and other academically gifted schools are branded to parents as the only way to get their students college ready and are the most competitive. Even White Station parent, Flint admitted that he is complicit in the privileges to enroll his student in the out of district Optional Program, although he could have enrolled them at any school (personal communication, July 13, 2018). Yet, understandably, no one wants to sacrifice their child to missed opportunities.

Given parents resistance to enroll their students into in-district schools that may not have an academically gifted program and the presence of black and brown students are higher, the question would be what would they be sacrificing their child to? At a Magnet Schools of American Conference, Hannah-Jones referred to magnet schools as “‘tools of inequality’ designed to ‘keep White parents in a district and not integrate schools’” (Cunningham, 2018). Magnet schools are no longer operating in their intended goal to desegregate schools but to keep and attract white and affluent students in their schools. Magnet schools have shown to increase diversity and help to maintain enrollment of student who would otherwise leave, such as White Station; however, “magnets draw the stronger students of color out of their neighborhood schools, reducing academic diversity in those schools” (Cunningham, 2018). Magnet schools are no longer on the path of desegregation, but of acquiring elitism. Parents do not want to sacrifice

their children to schools with underperforming black and brown students, although their presence could be the uplifting of that school.

The elitism of magnet and other academically gifted schools are guarded at all cost by parents, wanting to keep their schools at the top. Unfortunately, this protection is often times the rejection of black and brown students. The city of New York is experiencing this battle right now. Similar to the methods of optional schools and the requirement of a specific percentile or higher on the TCAP, New York City Schools require specific scores on their high-stakes Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT) (Frost, 2018). Mayor Bill de Blasio announced “he was committed to boosting the numbers of black and Hispanic students admitted to eight prestigious New York City high schools, in part by pushing to scrap the one high-stakes test that determines admission” (Zimmerman & Disare, 2018). This uproar has sparked uproar from many Asian families in New York City, making up majority of students in the eight prestigious schools decided upon by Mayor De Blasio. Although, an equitable decision, some Asian groups believe that the decision is unfair to reduce the seats that Asian students earned. Unfortunately, these attitudes come from the fear that black and brown students are not smart enough to attend high academic success. In order to protect academically successful schools, parents and policy makers are complicit in denying equitable education to black and brown students.

### **National Debate over the Necessity of AP Courses**

Talk around the need for AP courses have been circulating around the United States. AP classes are designed to be at the college level. At the end of the year students take the AP exam, scoring between a 1 and a 5 by the College Board. If students score a 3 or higher they are eligible for college credit (Tugend, 2017). AP classes were implemented in 1955 in the hope that

American students would be up to speed with the rest of the world; however, affluent and white schools had the most access to these schools. Beginning in the 1990s, AP programs were aimed to promote a means to “bridging the achievement gap between richer and poorer schools” (Tugend, 2017). Today, in addition to providing a chance for high school students to gain college credit, College Board claims to use AP classes as a way to raise the standards for poorer schools. By raising the standards for poorer schools, there is hope that this will also narrow the achievement gap between white students and black and brown students.

However, conversations about the expansion of AP classes have increased, the necessity of AP classes have been questioned. The critique many people have been having with College Board’s AP program is that they are “guilty of promising too much, offering its rigor as a cure for struggling school districts—something it was never meant to do” (Tugend, 2017). Millions of dollars are poured into the College Board’s AP program, will little return investment of its purpose of providing students with college credit. The fee to take the AP exam is currently ninety-four dollars, and “of the College Board’s total \$916 million in revenue in 2015, \$408 million came from fees for the test and instructional materials” (Tugend, 2017). Although, the AP exam fee can be reduced for financial need, a large amount of money is being funneled into the AP program when students are scoring a 3 or higher to receive college credit. Therefore, the questions that many critics hold against College Board is whether or not they are help struggling students and communities or simply getting paid.

Even as the College Board attempts to narrow the race gap, black and brown students are still not enrolled in AP classes at the rate of white students. Figures 5 and 6 were collected from data from College Board. Figure 5 shows the 2017 percentage of AP exam test takers by race and ethnicity provided by data from the College Board. Over 4 million students had taken an AP

Figure 5. 2017 Percentage of AP Exam Test Takers by Race and Ethnicity

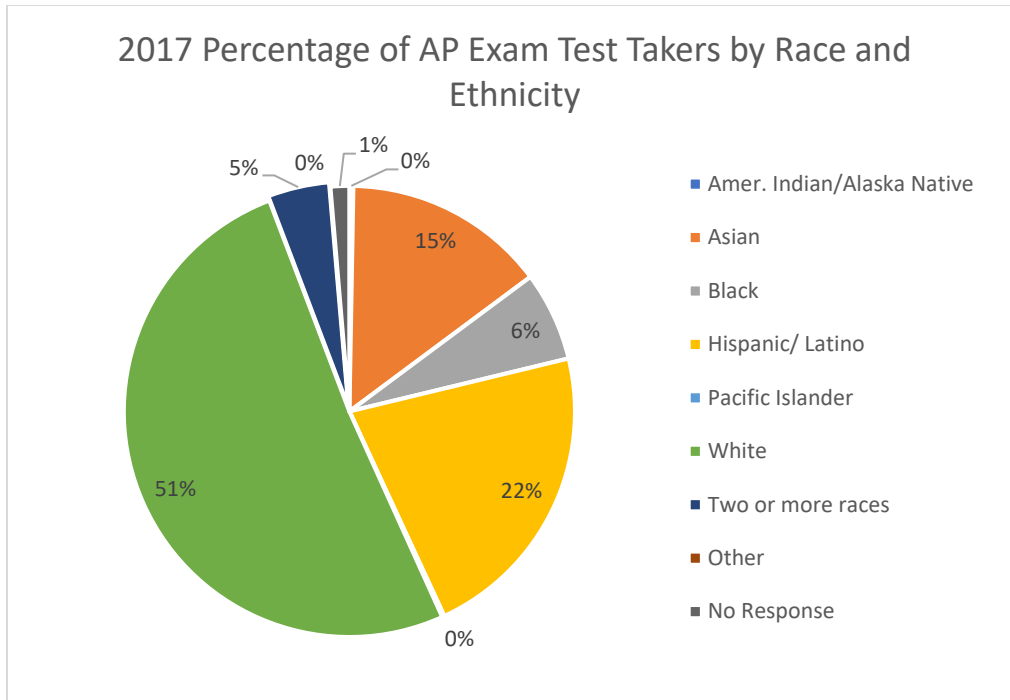


Figure 6. 2017 Average AP Exam Test Scores by Race and Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Average AP Score
American Indian/Alaska Native	2.23
Asian	3.25
Black	2.03
Hispanic/ Latino	2.39
Pacific Islander	2.41
White	3.02
Two or more races	2.90
Other	2.67
No Response	2.72
National Total	2.84

exam during 2017, and approximately half of those students were white. The number of black students is about 6% of AP exam test takers for 2017. Maybe the expansion of the AP program could assist in this national dilemma; however, many students fail to pass the test with a 3 to even receive college credit. Figure 6 shows the average score from each ethnic and racial group of test takers for 2017. What is significant here, is the access of AP classes and exams to Hispanic and Latinx student; however, their average is lower than Asians students. Asian and White student pass the AP exam more often than any other racial or ethnic group. Although, the College Board does not consider a 1 or a failing grade, students do not receive college credit with these scores (Tugend, 2017). The national average exam score for 2017 was 2.84, which has not changed significantly from previous years. Therefore, the design of College Board's AP program is not living up to its purpose, at least not for black and brown students.

The presence of AP and honors programs has caused many debates in cities across the country besides Memphis. AP and honors classes have been set on a pedestal for containing academically successful students; however, now these courses are being placed under more scrutiny. This scrutiny is coming from both high schools and colleges. In an article by eight heads of Washington-area private schools (2014), the authors discussed that due to the expansion of AP and honors, these courses are no longer containing only the best and the brightest.

According to the heads of the Washington-area private schools,

As a result, AP courses on high school transcripts are of diminished significance to college admissions officers. Further, we've conducted our own survey of almost 150 college and university admissions officers and have been assured that the absence of the AP designation will have no adverse impact on our students.

The real question for colleges is whether an applicant has taken a high school's

most demanding courses; the AP designation itself is irrelevant (Shaw, et al., 2014).

This information has a serious impact on the necessity of optional or magnet school programs that exclude students for not meeting a specific percentage on an academic achievement test. The need for students to take more academically rigorous courses are needed for students to stand out in their college applications, but the AP program is not necessarily the only avenue for this. However, as mentioned before, although student may not be passing the AP exam, they are making an attempt to stand out in their college applications.

### **Conclusion**

The Optional Program is the pairing of both a magnet school structure and the implementation of AP courses. Situating the SCS Optional Program into the larger national perspective flows well into what many other schools across the country are facing. The SCS optional program, like other magnet school programs are perpetuating inequity for black and brown student and economically disadvantaged students. Breaking down the Optional Program into both its intensified tracking system and AP programing, both have noticeable problems in each area. Magnet schools, or in this case, optional schools section off students for differential learning. Requirements set by optional school programs contributes to the lack of black students in AP/Honors courses. However, the AP program has potential to provide great outcomes for students if their purpose matched it actions. Therefore, what does this mean for the optional school system that has implemented both for decades?

What is seen in the national dilemma of optional schools and AP programs are happening right here in Memphis. The Optional Program is protected in Memphis, especially at the most



elite level in cases such as White Station. Optional programs are protected by the schools and the parents of students in which their students attend. Although, that protection may not be standing outside the school, it is being complicit in sending students to these schools when there are schools in your neighborhood. Also, middle and upper class white and black families participate in the political protection of the Optional Program, influencing those elected in support of maintaining the status quo. This research also brings attention to the need for AP courses to be available in all high schools. All students deserve exposure to AP courses; however, optional school requirements are strict and limited to mobility. The Optional Program paired with the implementation of AP courses reinforces the idea of only preparing students for college; however, not all students are headed that route. Whatever path a student is lead the exposure to AP course, according to the Ready Graduate can be essential to prepare them for whatever track they take.

Recommendations for correcting the Optional Program were gathered by incorporating the thoughts and ideas of the participants. The Optional Program is definitely in need of restructuring, and the participants of this research are aware of the problems within the system. The school-within-a-school structure promotes the segregation of students, and with segregation comes the differentiation of treatment and resources. White Station is identified as one of the best and most elite schools in Shelby County and is known for its academic accomplishments in the state and nationally. However, “White Station cannot be a beacon of whiteness in a sea of black” (A. Flint, personal communication, July 13, 2018). As the model optional school in SCS, White Station High School and the optional program are in need of a makeover.

Recommendations from the students of White Station look similar across the board. After discussing the racial disparity within the Optional Program, students were asked about how the

Optional Program in White Station should be changed. The student suggested a stronger advocacy for traditional students. For the students interviewed, traditional students often fell between the cracks and focused shifted primarily on the success of optional students. The enforcement of college readiness in a school that demands that of the optional students and not the traditional is no way to function. Mobility into the Optional Program is quite difficult after being labeled traditional, especially for socioeconomically disadvantage and black students. Traditional students are unaware that they can take optional courses, but they are in need of “someone advocating for them or seeing if that was even an option for them” (personal communication, July 13, 2018). That same support for optional students from teachers, administration, and counselors should be there for traditional students.

The student’s recommendation bleeds into the change that SCS Board member Kevin Woods would like to see happen in the optional program. Commissioner Woods suggested a better push in marketing of the optional program. The marketing of optional program has not done much marketing or rebranding for the optional program in years, operating in the purpose of attracting white and affluent families away from private and suburban school to their own schools. Woods suggested as a long-term approach that optional programs be held off at the primary level, with rigor in all schools. This allows the grouping of students to be introduced later and has the potential to include more students in optional program because rigor is presented to all students at a young age. Natalie McKinney had the same thoughts on the matter, stating that optional programs for students at the elementary level can include all students; therefore, what is the need for an Optional Program that begins to separate and produce inequity so early for students?

The Optional Program has underwent little restructuring since its first implementation in 1976. Students who are economically disadvantaged, most of whom are black, are largely affected by this lack of restructuring. The optional program and the AP programs are in need of reevaluation. The optional program promotes a divide amongst its students. That division creates a barrier between students who are optional and traditional students. The intentions behind AP courses should be evaluated, making sure it is benefiting the students in the classes rather than the administrators of their exams. Using White Station High School has been a useful tool in locating the barriers to black student enrollment in AP/Honors classes. If Memphis is to fix its problems of inequity in education, it must hold its most exceptional schools to the same standard and be willing to acknowledge its faults. What has been gained in this research has been the way optional schools perpetuate inequity, and that extends outside of black students alone, but for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. In order to create a high achieving and academically advanced program, it must be equitable for all, and further research on optional schools and the AP program should be considered to make this happen.

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