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STILL SEPARATE, *STILL* NOT EQUAL

Note: This article is the third in a series that will examine structural & institutionalized racism in Kansas City, Missouri. In this article, we examine the link between structural racism and education.

Southwest High School, located near the intersection of Wornall Road and 67th Street, opened in 1925, with an inaugural class of 951 boys and girls. Over the course of the next ten years, Southwest High doubled its enrollment, received national accolades as one of the top schools in the U.S., and boasted thriving academic and athletic programs[1].

At the end of the 1997-1998 school year, Southwest High School closed its doors. Enrollment had fallen to 465 from the 1960's peak of nearly 2,500, with test scores well below the national average, a poor attendance rate and a student body that was 95% Black and Brown[2].

The transformation of Southwest High School from a predominantly White, middle-class school into a nearly all-Black and Brown school and from a standard of excellence to eminent closure is not unique; it's a typical example of the failure of the fourteen school districts serving Kansas City, Missouri to provide quality education to young People of Color and the deterioration that "white flight" can leave in its wake[2].

Poverty and segregation resulting from the redlining, block busting and exclusionary real estate practices of the first half of the twentieth century in neighborhoods east of Troost deeply compromised the education of young

> "The original mission of the public schools ... is this understanding that no matter where you come from, you will go into the doors of a school and every child will receive the same education."
>
> -Nikole Hannah-Jones, Civil Rights & Racial Injustice Writer, the New York Times

People of Color, particularly Blacks/African Americans. White flight, a subsequent declining tax base and the rising costs of public services caused the Kansas City Public School District (the District) to become increasingly dependent on federal funding[3]. In the late 1950's, the college attendance rate for Kansas City Blacks was just 11%, and only 20% graduated from high school[4]. When national segregation was ordered in 1954, the state of Missouri left the responsibility to local jurisdictions and school districts, the District "allowed the eastern schools to go black, while protecting the western schools against integration", using Troost Avenue as a convenient "wall" between White and Black Kansas City[4]. Every public school east of Troost had become virtually all-Black by the 1970s. Paseo High School enrollment changed from all-white to 98% black from 1954 to 1969, as did Southeast High School from 1954 and 1973. However, Southwest High School, just west of Troost, remained less than 1% Black during the same time period.

Residential patterns further complicated neighborhood attendance zones in promoting any integration. In what was deemed an "emotional response" to residential and educational integration many White families relocated from the heart of the city to the ever-growing suburbs[5]. As these neighbor-

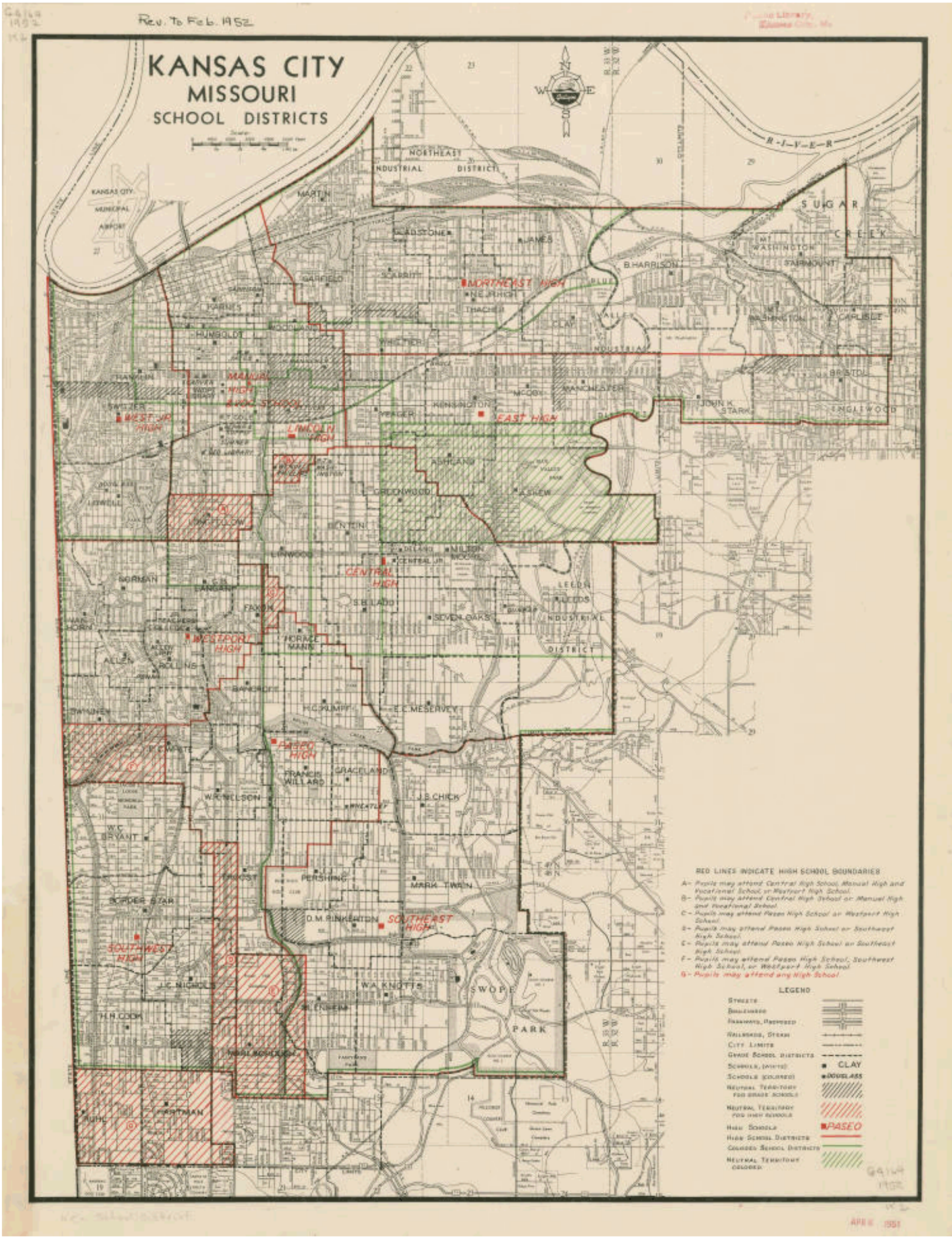

Figure 1. 1951 street map of Kansas City showing grade and high school neighborhood boundaries. "Colored Schools" are marked in green. Source: Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kanas City Public Library, KCMO.

hood populations evolved, the District continually redrew attendance zone boundaries, but Troost "was always the east-west dividing line, reinforcing the segregated school communities" (Figure 1)[5]. When it was clear that the District was not successful in integrating schools, decision makers refused to modify the original integration plan; by the 1970s, the District was no longer in compliance with national standards of integration[3].

For the next thirty years, the District would be consumed by legal issues, mainly a result of a

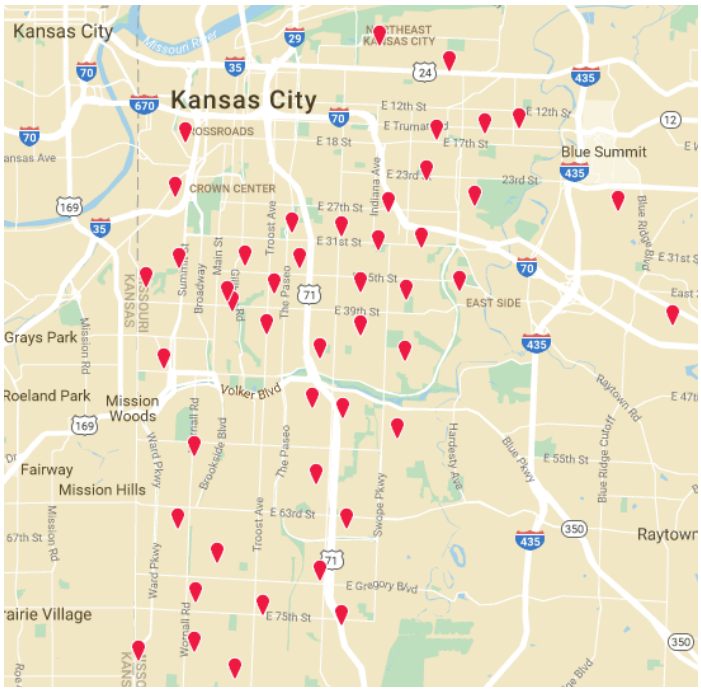

Figure 2. Locations of Schools Closed by KCPS. Source: Kansas City Star. http://projects.kansascity.com/2016/school-closings/

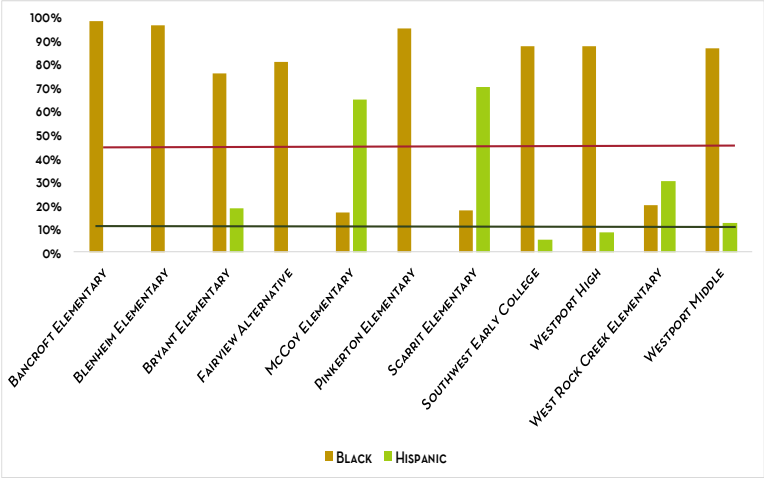

Figure 3. Black/African American and Hispanic Enrollment in Schools Closed by KCPS. The red line represents the average percent of Black/African American Students in the District. The dark green line represents the average percent of Hispanic students in the District. Source: DESE

suit filed in 1977 by the District on behalf of the students, alleging it was the joint responsibility of both Kansas and Missouri, as well as the suburban school districts, to be a part of a solution to finally desegregate public schools in Kansas City[6]. In 1985, Federal Judge Russell Clark excused the suburban districts from the suit and ordered the rebuilding of the District at any cost, birthing "one of the most watched experiments in public education"[6]. New magnet schools were built, teacher salaries increased and nearly $2 billion later, the District should have been the best of the best. However, the racial gap persisted, student performance failed to improve and there was less, not more, integration[3,6,7]. Historical patterns reigned supreme, and the District continued to have, on average, 6-8 times the Black share of all districts in the Kansas City Metro Area (KCMA), more than twice the Hispanic population and nearly 3.5 times the poverty rate of other KCMA school districts[3]. The court-ordered integration experiment was deemed a complete failure; by 2000, the District had failed to meet all 11 performance standards necessary for state accreditation, including test scores, dropout rate, and attendance and 28 of the District's 61 schools were closed, many with high Black and Hispanic populations as compared to the District's average (Figures 2 & 3)[4,8].

In recent years, the District has made progress in several areas. In the 2014-2015 school year, 13 schools had met the state standard for accreditation, with an additional 8 meeting the standard for provisional accreditation[7]. In the fall of 2016, the District announced that it had schools at "full accreditation level on the state-issued report that measures progress in a number of performance areas, including how well students did on standardized tests"[9]. However, inequities remain, including that the four-year graduation rate for all students remained well below the state average, dropout rates are 3 times that of the state, and suspension rates are twice that of the state[10]. In 2014, nearly

90% of KCPS's students were eligible for the free and reduced lunch program, compared to an average of less than 30% of students in suburban school districts, such as Park Hill, Liberty and Blue Springs[10]. What's more is residents of Kansas City, particularly White, middle and upper class residents, seem to have accepted the only solution for a quality education in Kansas City is to send their kids elsewhere, rather than work to address these issues. Although recent surveys by the District indicate most residents (90%) agree the District is moving in the right direction nearly 75% do not believe the District provides equitable access to quality education[12]. Simultaneously, enrollment continues to decline, while charter schools and surrounding suburban school districts continue to grow (Figure 4)[10].

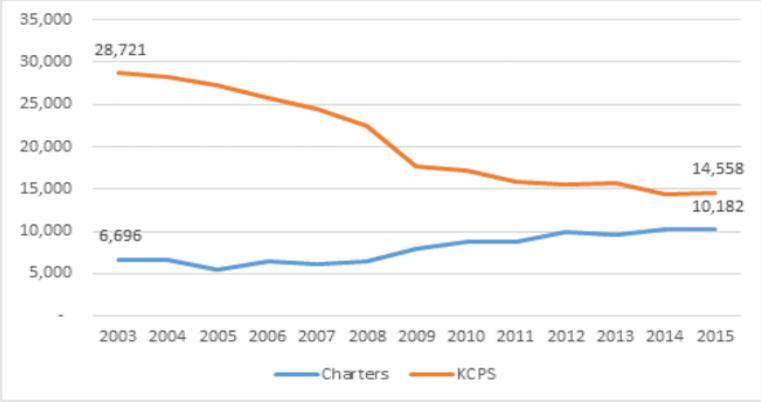

Figure 4. Enrollment trends for Kansas City Public School District Compared to Charter Schools in the same service area. Source: Kansas City Public Schools Final Master Plan.

The District has not accepted this as the status quo, however. In July of this year, KCPS released its 2018-2023 strategic plan, which focuses on a community-wide commitment to student learning and success. The plan focuses on more than academic achievement, but also aims to ensure the social-emotional, cognitive, health and community support for students. The strategic plan is designed with the idea that there is a role for everyone in making these goals a reality, from students to teachers, from school leadership to district leadership, and from family members and caretakers to members of the Kansas City community. The strategic plan stands as a collective promise to turn good intentions into stronger results, and a stronger district[11].

Why this matters

Graduation from high school is a strong predictor of better health. Research has found high school graduation to be associated with a longer life expectancy, improved health and an increased quality of life[13]. In Kansas City, the "entrenched social and economic separation" between Whites and Blacks has become the status quo. Lower graduation rates and test scores and higher dropout rates among

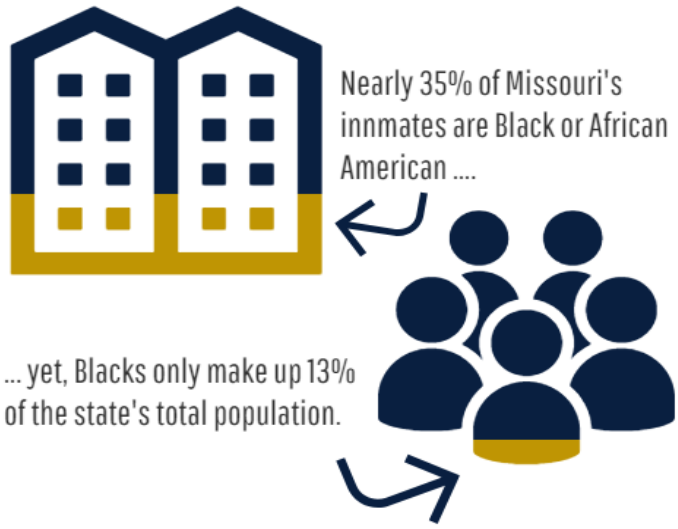

Figure 5. Missouri's Prison population contains a disproportionate number of black inmates when compared to the general state population. Sources: MO DHSS Population MICAs 2015, MO DOC Annu-

the District's students have similarly become an accepted part of life in Kansas City. *The reality is that this is simply unacceptable.*

It may be well-known that one cannot "dropout of school into a good job"[14], but beyond a lower earning capacity (high school dropouts earn, on average, 41% less than someone with a high school diploma), having less than high school education creates a deficit of essential skills needed to fuel the economy and instead fills the pipeline to prison[14]. In Missouri, Black/African American men make up a disproportionate number of inmates in the state prison system, which is aligned with national trends (Figure 5).

Across the nation, boys of color, particularly Black and Hispanic boys, are at increased risk of

imprisonment during their lifetime, and are also more likely to be held back a grade in school as compared to white children[14]. In high poverty school districts, nearly half of potential dropouts can be identified by 6th grade, with grade retention as a key indicator. The correlation between these statistics and the racial makeup of the prison population is not by accident[14].

The majority of interventions around these issues have almost exclusively been within the education sector, yet many obstacles to school completion are the same social determinants as those for health and overall well-being (i.e., racism, poverty, hunger, violence, distress)[13]. As such, we can no longer be complicit in allowing the social structures that lead to the detriment of public education in Kansas City to continue.

In Kansas City, those with less education are more likely to die younger (see Figure 6) and mothers with less than high school education are more likely to have early and adequate prenatal care, which is associated with babies born with low or very low birthweight (see Figure 7). The interesting nuance when examining these outcomes by race is that whites with less than high school education have slightly higher rates, however, death rates (see Figures 8 & 9) and poor prenatal outcomes dramatically decrease with increasing education (see Figure 10). For Blacks, while these outcomes do decrease, it is at a much lower rate, such that we find disparities widening with increases in education. Essentially, in Kansas City, educated Blacks still have worse outcomes than their White counterparts.

These issues are not the sole responsibility of the Kansas City Public Schools District, nor is it the sole responsibility of those living within the District's boundaries. As a metropolitan area and a community, we are all impacted when one area lags behind, and it is not simply one's heath that is hindered. Economic research has shown time and time again that educational achievement is positively linked to a stronger and more robust economy[14], higher average wages[16], and in-

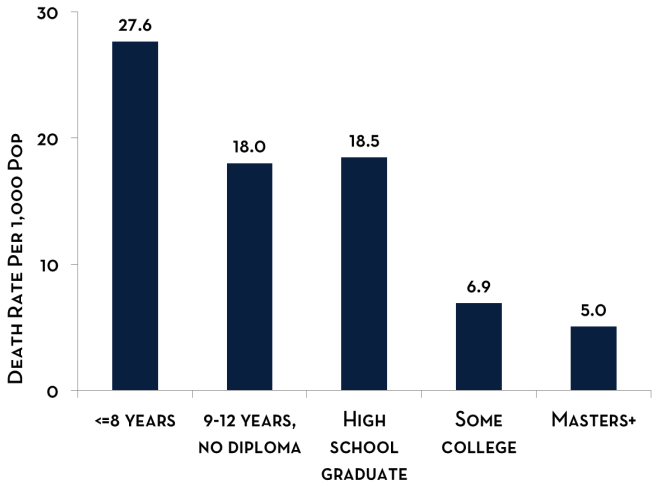

Figure 6. Death Rates by Level of Education, KCMO 2011-2015. Source: MO DHSS Death Data.

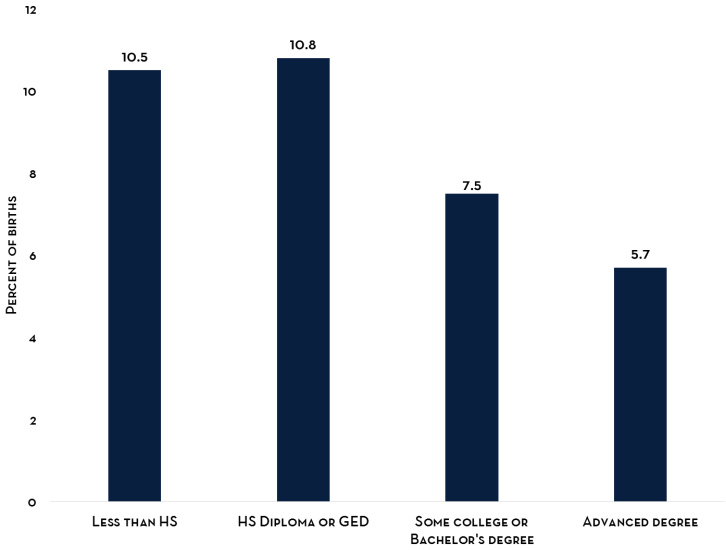

Figure 7. Low Birthweight Rates by Mother's Level of Education, KCMO 2011-2015. Source: MO DHSS Birth Data.

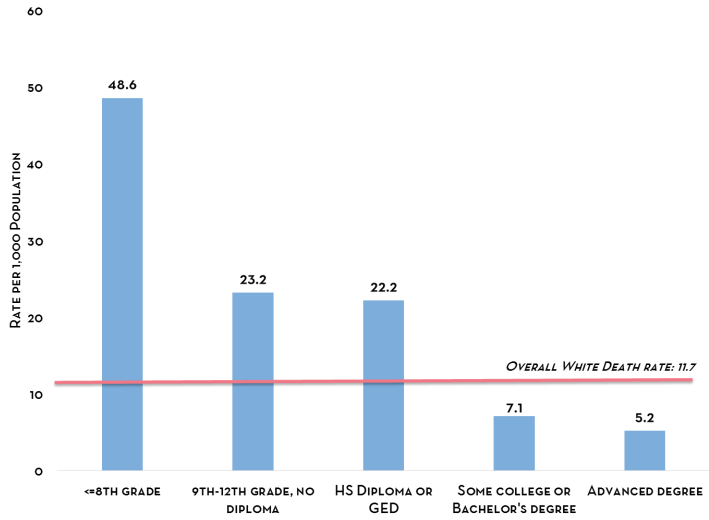

Figure 8. Death Rate by Education Among White Adults 25 Years and Older, KCMO 2011-2015

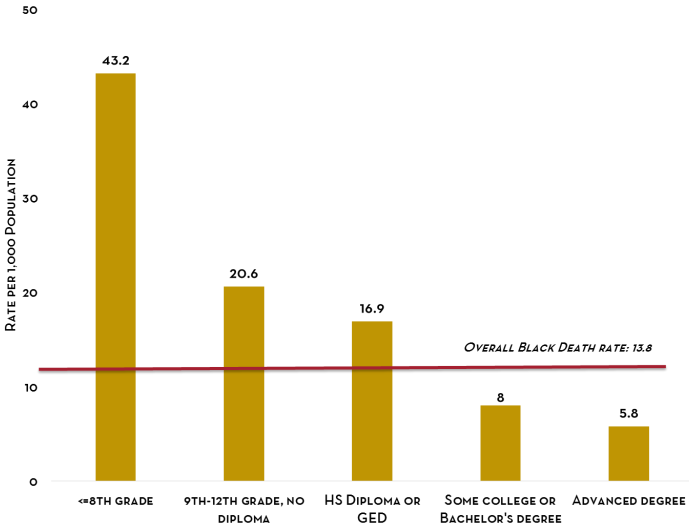

Figure 9. Death Rate by Education Among Black Adults 25 Years and Older, KCMO 2011-2015

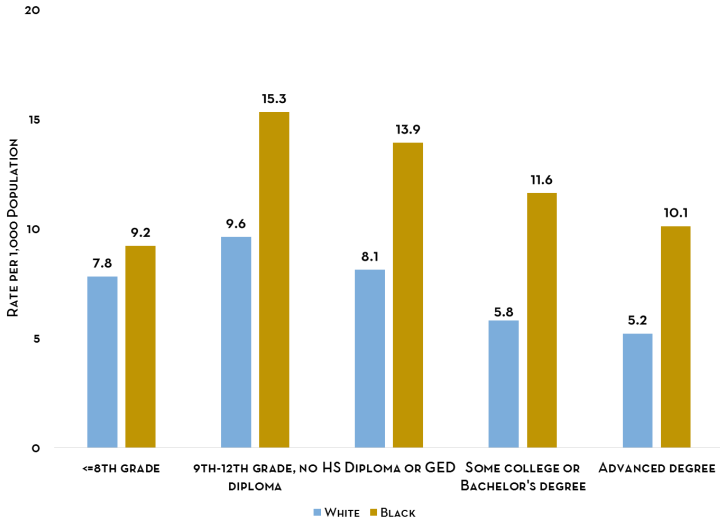

Figure 10. Rate of Low Birth Weight Births by Education Among White and Black Mothers, KCMO 2011-2015

creased social capital[15]. And, while health experts throughout the country have called for policy change that will advance population health through provision of truly equal opportunities to basic services such as quality public education, few policies have ever emerged[16].

In Kansas City, we can no longer stand by and accept that some school districts will always be more desirable, that charter schools are the only source of quality education south of the Missouri River and north of 85th street, and that working in "good-faith" is enough.

Education is clearly valued by communities and leaders alike in Kansas City; it is time to put that value into action. Policies that drive better educational outcomes, including those with a focus on literacy, can vastly improve an individual's and a community's outlook[17]. We must not forget our past, however, when forming these policies, and we must remember the underlying social structures that lead us to our current status in education.

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