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Despite Grade Inflation, Family Structure Still Matters for Student Performance

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Introduction

The last quarter century has seen a dramatic increase in grade inflation on student report cards in elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the United States. So much so that a student's grade point average (GPA), which was once as useful as SAT or ACT scores, has become almost worthless as a predictor of how well the student would do in college or graduate school. So many students get "A's" on their report cards that a straight-A average is hardly a mark of academic distinction anymore. And high school graduation rates have continued climbing even as the 12th-Grade results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have remained stagnant or even declined.¹ There has also been a [notable decline in disciplinary actions by schools](#) for student misconduct or lack of application. Fewer students get notes sent home or are made to repeat grades because they have not made sufficient academic progress.

These grading and disciplinary changes are partly the result of well-intentioned though largely cosmetic efforts to improve social mobility and reduce gaps between racial, ethnic, and economic groups in this country. Progressive education reformers have sought to make family background less of a determinant of how well a student does in school. Yet evidence from two nationwide household surveys of parents conducted nearly a quarter of a century apart demonstrate that family factors, such as marital stability, parent education, family income, and race and ethnicity, [are as important as ever](#), or even more so.

Majority of Students Now Get A's

In the 1996 National Household Education Survey, 40% of all students in elementary, middle, and secondary schools in the U.S. earned “mostly A” grades on their report cards (according to parental reports). Twenty-three years later, in the 2019 National Household Education Survey, a 54% majority of students received mostly “A” grades. The proportion who received Ds or lower grades fell from 4% in 1996 to 2% in 2019.²

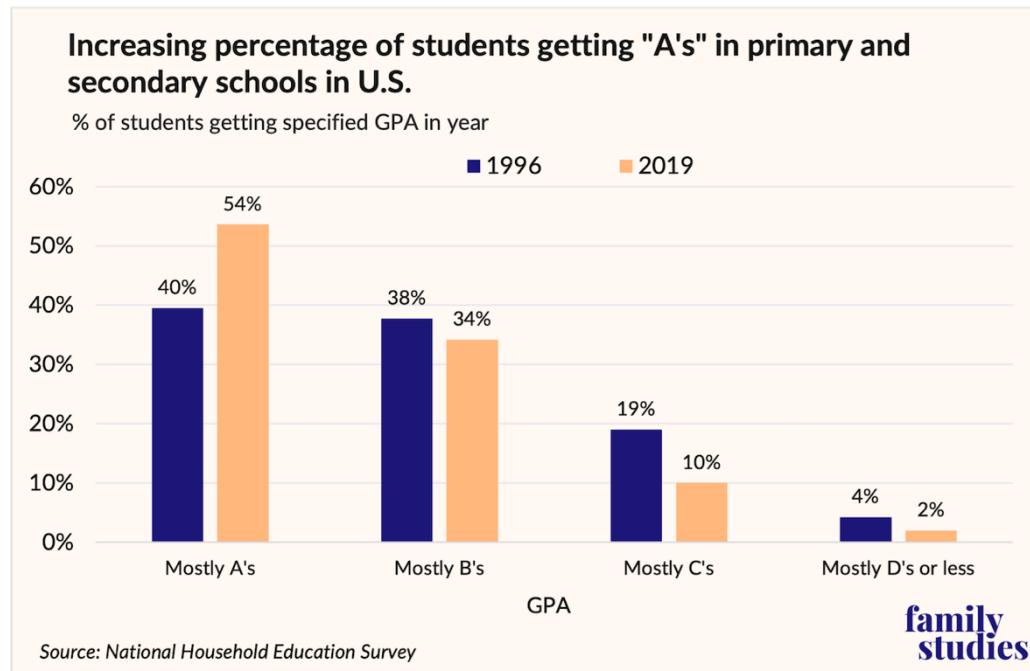


Figure 1: Percent of U.S. students getting “As” in each age group and year, 1996 and 2019

As students move from primary to middle to secondary school, they are less likely to get “A” grades. But at every level, they are more likely to do so now than in the past, as shown in the figure below.³

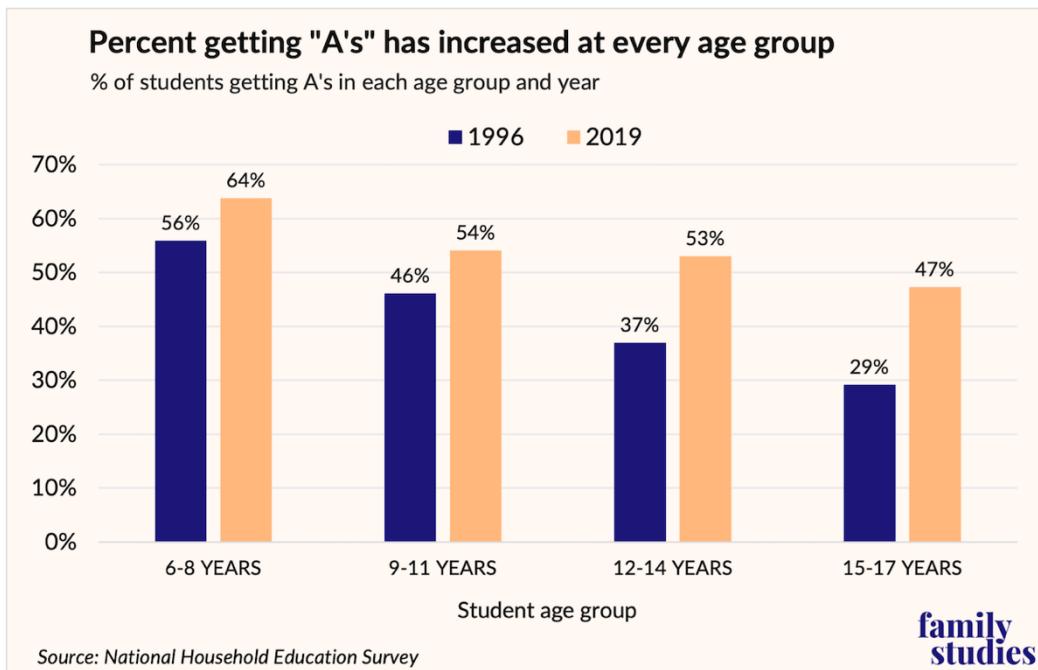


Figure 2: Percent of U.S. students getting letter grades in primary and secondary schools, 1996 and 2019

Students From Intact Families More Likely to Get “A’s”

Despite the ballooning number of students getting stellar grades on their report cards, those being raised by their married birth parents are still more likely to get mostly “A” grades than those being raised by single parents, stepparents, cohabiting birth parents, or other relative or non-relative guardians. This is the case even after taking account of parent-education and family-income differences across family types, as well as differences in their racial and ethnic composition.

The figure below shows the adjusted proportion of students from intact families who got mostly “A” grades in 1996 and 2019, and the comparable proportions for students from unmarried and disrupted families.⁴

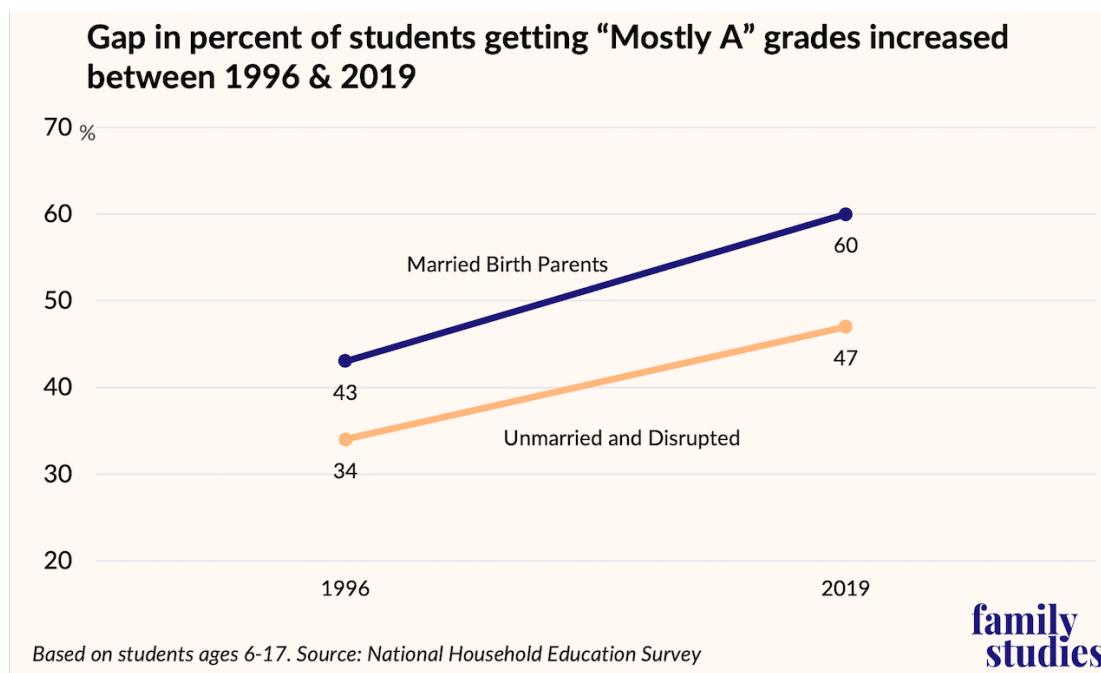


Figure 3: Adjusted percent of U.S. students getting mostly “A” grades, by family structure of students, 1996 and 2019

The intact family advantage has actually increased as grading has become more lenient. It went from 1.45 times better odds in 1996 to 1.68 times better odds in 2019, a statistically significant change.⁵

Parent education. Children of college-graduate parents and parents with post-graduate or professional degrees are more likely, on average, to get good report cards in primary and secondary school than the children of parents who have only a high school diploma or less. In 2019, the odds of a mostly-A report card were 1.68 times greater for children of college graduates and 2.52 times greater for the children of doctoral and professional degree holders than for offspring whose parents had only a high-school diploma or less. The comparative odds did not grow more or less favorable between 1996 and 2019.

Family income. Students from families with incomes above the national median or below the median but well above poverty get better report cards in elementary and secondary school than students from families with incomes near or below the poverty line. In 2019, students from the top 19% of household income distribution had 1.98 times better odds of an A report card than students from families in the bottom 10% of the distribution. This advantage did not change significantly between 1996 and 2019.

Race and ethnicity. White and Asian students in the U.S. have better odds of having high GPA's than Black and Hispanic students. This is so even after taking into account average differences across racial and ethnic groups in parental marital status, education, and income. In 2019, White students had 1.34 times higher odds than Black students of getting "A" report cards, while Asian students had 1.94 times higher odds. These comparative odds did not change significantly between 1996 and 2019, despite all groups having higher numbers of students who get A grades.

Student sex. Girls were more likely to get A grades in both 1996 (odds ratio = 1.93 times higher than for boys) and 2019 (odds ration = 1.71 times higher than for boys). The difference across the years was not statistically significant.

Fewer Parents Today Get Contacted by Schools

In 1996, 27% of parents reported being contacted by their child's school because of schoolwork problems. In 2019, that number had fallen to 22%. In 1996, 22% were contacted because of the child's conduct in class. By 2019, that number had fallen to 17%. In addition, the proportion of students who repeated a grade fell from 13% in 1996 to 6% in 2019. School contact for conduct problems was lowest in the 15-17-year age range. But in every age group, there were declines in their frequency between the two timepoints.

Despite the overall drop in school contacts with parents, students being raised in unmarried and disrupted families are more likely to get emails sent to their parents from the school than those being raised by their married birth parents. This is the case even after taking account of parent-education and family-income differences across family types, as well as differences in their racial and ethnic composition. The figure below shows the adjusted proportion of students from intact families who got notes home for conduct issues in 1996 and 2019 and the comparable proportions for students from unmarried and disrupted families.

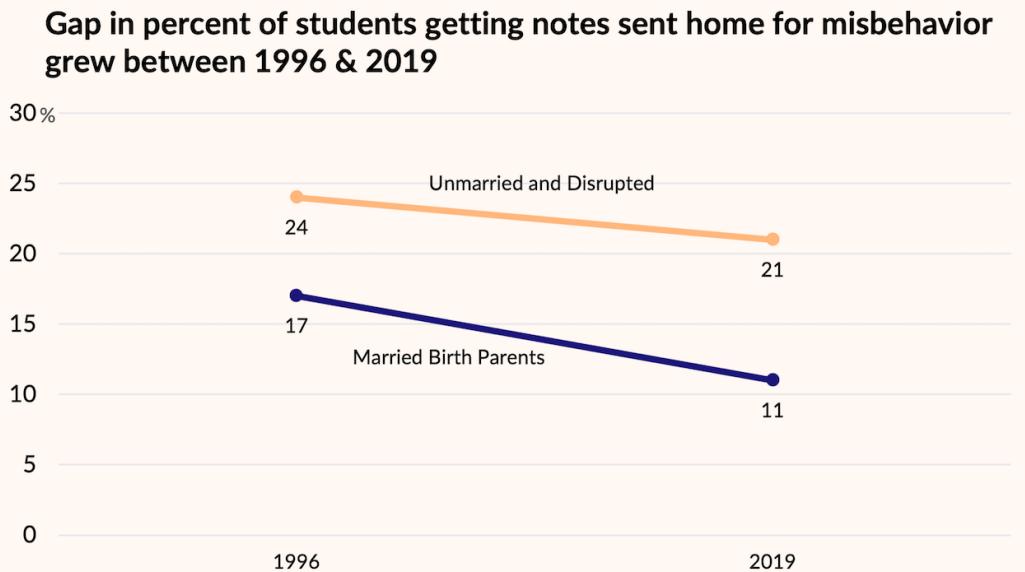


Figure 4: Adjusted percentage of U.S. students whose parents were contacted by the school for conduct problems, by family structure of student, 1996 and 2019

The disrupted family disadvantage increased even though disciplinary practices have become more lenient. It went from 1.63 times higher odds in 1996 to 2.09 times higher odds in 2019, a statistically significant change.

Income. Students from families with household incomes below the poverty level were more likely to get notes home than those with incomes above the national median (odds ratio 1.376 times higher in 1996 and 1.68 times higher in 2019). The disadvantage did not change significantly between the two time periods.

Race. Black students were more likely to get notes home than white students in both 1996 and 2019, even after controlling for family structure, family income and parent education. Hispanic students were more likely to get notes home in 1996, but not in 2019. Asian students were less likely than white students to get notes home in 2019.

Sex. Boys were more likely than girls to get notes home due to conduct problems in both 1996 and 2019. The difference in odds across the years was not statistically significant.

Understanding the Trends

A comparison of national surveys of parents conducted in 1996 and 2019 provides striking evidence of more lenient grading and permissive disciplining of students in elementary, middle, and high schools across America. Despite these trends in school practices, the advantage for student achievement and adjustment of being raised by married birth parents rather than single, step, or foster parents has grown stronger over the last quarter century. There are also continuing but not larger gaps in student achievement and behavior associated with parent education and family income disparities, as well as with the sex, and race and ethnicity of the child.

A possible explanation for the increased importance of marriage and marital stability for student success is that married adults with children comprise a more select, motivated, and advantaged group than 23 years ago, whereas the mix of formerly married and never married adults who make up the unmarried group of parents has changed in ways that put their children at even greater disadvantage. Both marriage rates and divorce rates have gone down, as have teen birth rates. But unmarried birth rates have not. That means that [children of single mothers are now more likely](#) to have a never-married rather than divorced mother.

Children of divorced mothers often experience the stresses of parental conflict and separation. But they are more likely than children of never-married mothers to have college-educated mothers and benefit from parental custody, visitation, and child support agreements. They tend to see more of their non-custodial

parent (usually the father) and gain from his attention, care, and financial assistance. They are also more likely to have mothers who are gainfully employed, rather than welfare dependent. By comparison, children of never-married mothers, who do not have the same resources in terms of custodial father support and mother's education, are less likely to live in as good housing, or be raised in the best neighborhoods, or have attend quality schools.

At the same time, today's married mothers and fathers are older, more apt to both have college degrees, and more likely to both be in the paid labor force than was the case in the mid-1990's. They are also more likely to have followed the "success sequence" of first finishing school, then finding employment, then getting married, and then having children. Never-married mothers have, by definition, not followed at least part of that sequence.

Conclusion

Some readers may wonder whether the increases in the proportions of students getting higher grades on their report cards may reflect genuine progress in student achievement and conduct rather than easier grading and more lenient disciplinary practices. That optimistic view is contradicted by the results of standardized achievement testing programs, such as the federal NAEP and numerous state-administered tests. Although those assessments have shown some small signs of better achievement at lower grade levels, the picture at high-school completion has been one of overall stagnation and persistence of longstanding achievement gaps.¹ Furthermore, the extensive need for remedial instruction and high rates of college dropout among [community- and state-college students across the country](#) are a further testament to the illusory quality of many report cards and diplomas.

The results reported here are a further demonstration of the difficulty of overcoming family influences on student achievement and adjustment. Ascribing that difficulty to inferior teaching or insufficient allocation of resources ignores the enormous amounts of money and effort that have been devoted by local, state, and federal governments to address achievement gaps over the past 60 years. It is well past time for policymakers to reconsider what goals might actually be achievable and what methods might work for attaining those goals, and to recognize the role that family structure plays in student educational success.

Endnotes

1. [Digest of Education Statistics: 2024](#). Table 219.10. Adjusted Freshman Graduation Rate, 1969-70 to 2022-23. [National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education](#).
2. The proportion of students who did not receive letter grades from their schools, was 18% in 1996 and 12% in 2019. Not using letter grades is more common in the elementary than in the middle and secondary grades. In 1996, the percentages of students not getting letter grades went from 52% among 6-to-8-year-olds, to 14% among 9-to-11-year-olds, to 5% among 12-to-14-year-olds and 4% among 15-to-20-year-olds. In 2019, the comparable percentages were 33%, 14%, 3% and 2%. These students were excluded from the analyses shown in Figures One, Two, and Three.
3. Compared to 15-to-17-year-old students in 1996, 6-to-8-year-olds had 4 times better odds of getting mostly A grades, 9-to-11-year-olds had 1.55 better odds, and 12-to-14-year-olds had 1.46 times better odds. In 2019, 6-to-8-year-olds had 2 times better odds, 9-to-11-year-olds had 1.35 times better odds, and 12-to-14-year-olds had 1.2 times better odds, than 15-to-17-year-olds in that year. These odds ratios are adjusted for variations across grade levels in parent education and family income levels, as well as in racial and sex composition of the groups.
4. Percentages adjusted for differences across family types in parent education and family income levels and age, sex, and racial composition.
5. The odds ratios are adjusted for socioeconomic and demographic differences across family groups in parent education and family income levels, and sex age, and racial and ethnic composition of the groups at each timepoint).

Authors

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Nicholas Zill is a research psychologist and Senior Fellow of the Institute for Family Studies. He directed the National Survey of Children, a longitudinal survey that produced widely cited findings about children's adjustments after parental divorce.



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