

# White Privilege in Schools

by Ruth Anne Olson

It is important to distinguish between prejudice and privilege. Where as racial prejudice is negative action *directed against* an individual, privilege is passive advantage that *accrues to* an individual or group. Good teachers recognize and actively address prejudice. But as Peggy McIntosh (1988) points out, most White people are blind to the privileges accorded to White children and parents in schools.

I tried to identify my own family's experience of White privilege in schools and without much effort, it became clear that we have, indeed, benefited from privileges to which we have given little thought. Using McIntosh's format I could elaborate on her work and add observations from my own experience.

- Whatever topics my children choose to study, they are confident that they will find materials that link people of their race to the accomplishments in those areas.
- My children know that they will always see faces like their own liberally represented in the textbooks, posters, films and other materials in the hallways, classrooms and media centers of their schools.
- When my children talk about celebrations, holidays or family observances in show-and-tell or in other informal exchanges at school, they know that their teachers will have experienced similar events and will be able to reinforce their stories.
- My children are confident that the musical instruments, rhythms, harmonies, visual design forms and dramatic traditions of their culture will be generously recognized in the formal and informal uses of music, theater and visual arts in their schools.
- The color of my children's skin causes most adults in school offices, classrooms and hallways to have neutral or positive assumptions about them.

- My children know that the vast majority of adults in their schools will be of their same racial background, even in classrooms where many or most of their fellow students are of races different from theirs.
- My children are confident that they will never be embarrassed by being called on to tell the class about their race, culture or special ways of celebrating events.
- When I visit their schools, my children know that school staff members will reserve judgment about my economic class, my level of education and my reason for being in the school until I make them known.

## A Closer Look at White Privilege

Helping parents, students and educators examine White privilege is a crucial step towards supporting equity in education. In addition to reviewing the lists of school privileges by Ruth Anne Olson, one can also examine statistical data about current economic realities of race, gender, wealth and ownership, labor and government spending, education, welfare, health and the environment. *The Ultimate Field Guide to the U.S. Economy* by Nancy Folbre and the Center for Popular Economics is full of graphs, charts and statistics such as the sample below. These charts can be duplicated and distributed for review in small groups. Ask each group to share some of the facts they learned from their chart, what surprised them and what they can conclude about the ways in which Whites still have privilege in this country. (*The Ultimate Field Guide to the U.S. Economy* is available at [www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org).)

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- My children take for granted that the color of any crayons, bandages, or other supplies in their classrooms labeled “flesh” will be similar to their own.
- I take for granted that the tests used to judge my children’s achievement and to determine placement in special classes have been developed with groups that included significant numbers of students who share our racial history and culture.
- My children are confident that they will never be embarrassed by hearing others suggest that the problems of the school (low levels of achievement, the need for special support services, etc.) are caused by the high numbers of children of their race.
- I am confident that policy decisions that affect my children’s school experience will be made by state and local bodies dominated by people who understand our racial history and culture.

This list can go on. My family never asked for these privileges; principals and teachers didn’t purposely create them for us; and, frankly neither they nor we have been consciously aware these privileges exist.

But stating that no one is to blame does not erase the fact that privilege has allowed my family to take for granted things that others must spend time, energy and resources trying to earn. And while I have been blind to the existence of our privileges, people who don’t share them cannot help but see them and feel resentment, puzzlement, disappointment and rage at the fact that their children are excluded from the privileged class. ✱

References available online at [www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org).

### Discussion Questions

- Can you think of other privileges that could be added to this list?
- What are the implications for children of color if Whites have these privileges?
- How can the system be changed so that these ‘privileges’ become rights for everyone?
- What actions can you take to help the system change?

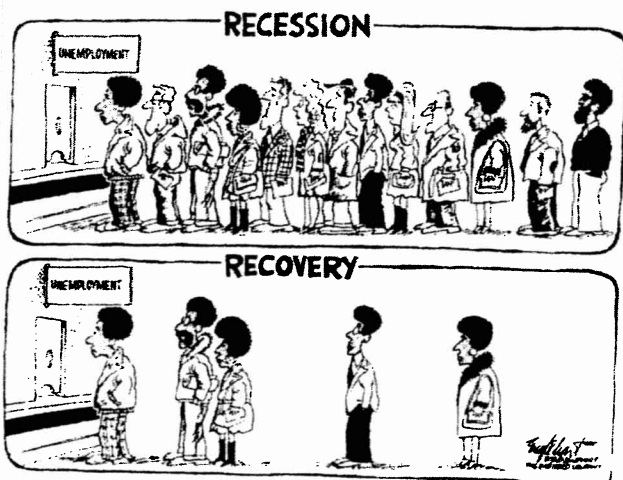
### Last Hired

Unemployment is a game of musical chairs. When the music stops, not everyone has a seat, and it is mostly African Americans and Latinos who are left standing. In 1998, 8% of Black workers and 7% of Latinos could not find jobs, while only 4% of Whites were in the same predicament.

Teenagers had an even harder time. The unemployment rate among Black youths ages 16-19 was 30%; among Whites it was 14%. Persistently high

unemployment rates discourage people from looking for work. Black male labor force participation rates have dropped considerably in recent years.

Black workers are often the first fired as well as the last hired; they suffered disproportionately from job cuts during the 1990-91 recession. By bearing a large share of the burden of unemployment, people of color buffer Whites against the ups and downs of the business cycle.



Unemployment Rate by Race and Latino Origin  
(civilian workers age 16 and above)

