

# Families' Goals, School Involvement, and Children's Academic Achievement: A Follow-up Study Thirteen Years Later

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## **Abstract**

A study conducted from 1996–2000 focused on the academic development of children within a statewide educational reform effort, including changing the organizational structure of the early years of schooling into nongraded primary programs (formerly age-based classrooms for kindergarteners through third grade). The multisite study involved children from mainly poor and working class families and focused on supports and barriers to learning both in and out of school. Family visits throughout the years of the study viewed parents as experts on their children, with teachers seeking to learn from them through informal conversations and formal interviews. The data collected provided an impetus for restructuring classroom instruction and for exploring ways of engaging the families more intentionally and meaningfully with their children's classrooms. The study reported here is a follow-up with families in one of the sites. Again, family visits included taperecorded interviews about the children's academic performance at the end of high school, current goals, and parents' perceptions of their child's schooling experience and their own involvement with the schools over time. The discussion includes an update about the families, a description of the children's educational outcomes and future educational plans, and insights and implications about family connections and student success.

**Key Words:** family, parents, involvement, engagement, schools, home visits, goals, teachers, longitudinal research, perceptions, achievement, low income

## Introduction

*"You don't have to go to college, but you need to finish high school, because otherwise you are going to be doing like I've done as far as jobs."*

*"My biggest mistake was school, and I really feel like that ruined my whole life, because I didn't go to school."*

This article introduces the children and parents of seven families from one small town who, over 13 years, invited their child's teacher and a university research partner (the author) into their homes. On these "family visits," each family shared insights about goals for their child, the child's academic progress, their own involvement their child's school, work and recreation activities of the family, as well as the family's challenges and celebrations. The sections that follow provide an explanation of the initial study that began the relationship with these families; contextual information about the setting; descriptions of the children as they began school; findings from a recent follow-up study; and implications for enhancing family engagement with schools. We begin this account in 1996.

## Study of a State-Mandated Reform for Young Children

The two quotes above were shared by parents who participated in a funded study conducted from 1996-2000 focused on the academic development of children within a statewide educational reform effort (McIntyre & Kyle, 2001). An initial goal of equalizing state funding for school districts resulted in more sweeping changes which included a change in the organizational structure of the early years of schooling into nongraded primary programs (formerly age-based classrooms for kindergarteners through third grade), broadened decision-making to include more parent participation on site-based school councils, and redesigned curriculum and instruction and the assessment and reporting systems that would determine and communicate student progress.

Our multiyear and multisite study addressed the nongraded primary program aspect of the reform initiative. It focused on children from mainly poor and working class families, many of Appalachian descent, and addressed the following key questions: What inhibited learners in and out of school? What were the societal, institutional, and personal barriers to learning? What supports did the children receive at home and school that enabled some of them to transcend economic conditions to achieve at high levels? (These questions and issues, however, are not the focus of this paper. Findings on the initial study are found in McIntyre & Kyle, 2001.) Further, we specifically chose teachers

to participate in the study who had been identified by their principals as highly skilled and effective implementers of the reform agenda.

A sociocultural perspective (Tharp & Gallimore, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978) framed the initial study with a significant amount of effort paid to spending time with families and learning from them. Researchers such as Moll and González (2004) have demonstrated the benefits of getting to know families well and then building connections into classroom teaching with families' "funds of knowledge." This concept refers to families' essential knowledge and skills needed for their effective functioning (Velez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). This perspective and interest in families' views about their children's schooling experience and goals for their children's future has continued to frame the follow-up study reported here.

In order to address all of the research questions of the initial study, we followed 30 primary grade children for two, three, or four years (depending on the research site and students' entry and exit from primary grades). Our data sources included a variety of classroom documents that represented children's development, teachers' assessments of students' progress, and observations and formal interviews of the children's teachers.

We also visited, with the classroom teachers, the homes of the 30 children approximately every eight weeks for the duration of the study. This meant four visits for some families and up to 15 visits for others. During the visits, we viewed the parents as experts on their children, seeking to learn from them. Although we gained many insights through informal visits and conversations, we also formally interviewed the families, taperecording their responses. We first asked about their children, then about themselves; we asked about their backgrounds, demographics, beliefs about schooling, and goals for their children (McIntyre, Kyle, Moore, Sweazy, & Greer, 2001). The family data we collected provided a major impetus for restructuring classroom practices to provide the most effective instruction for these children and for exploring ways of engaging the families more intentionally and meaningfully with the schools and their children's classrooms (Kyle, McIntyre, Miller, & Moore, 2002, 2006).

Researchers have confirmed what teachers know about the importance of family involvement and have demonstrated that such involvement has a positive impact on students' eventual success academically (Harvard Family Research Project, 2006/2007; Marcon, 1999; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Sanders & Herting, 2000). Furthermore, the benefits for students can be long term (Barnard, 2004).

In 2005, as the children were leaving middle school and entering high school, we conducted a follow-up study with approximately 25 families across the three study sites with the purposes of (1) understanding the parents'

perspectives about their child's schooling experience and academic progress since leaving the primary program; (2) determining parents' current educational goals for their child; and (3) with their permission, collecting and examining information either from the parents or from the school(s) about the child's performance on state and district required achievement tests and other assessments, such as the state-required writing portfolio, since exiting the primary program. We again conducted taperecorded interviews using a prescribed protocol as well as talking informally with the families.

When we conducted those visits, the children and their families asked if we would return as they were leaving high school. In one site, this has occurred. The study reported here provides data from this one site collected 13 years after the children entered kindergarten in an elementary school located in a small town about 40 minutes from a large urban area. The town is characterized by a courthouse square in the center, a railroad track running down the middle of the main street, small locally owned shops and restaurants, and an annual county parade full of bands, antique cars, and politicians. In the last few years, the town has expanded with new shopping areas, churches, and chain restaurants. The school still draws students from more affluent subdivisions as well as trailer parks, apartments, and government-subsidized housing.

The teacher involved in the initial and subsequent studies was experienced and highly respected in the district. She had grown up in the community, raised her children there, was active in a local church, and had taught the parents of some of the children now enrolled in her classroom. Although she was just a few years from retirement, she had requested a transfer to the school because it was to pilot the nongraded primary program before it was mandated to begin. She embraced the concept as consistent with her own views of teaching and children's learning and wanted to be a part of the new endeavor.

The primary classroom combined children in what would traditionally be labeled kindergarten and first grade, representing the notion of a continuous progress model based on developmentally appropriate practices. The following year, due to enrollment issues, kindergarten classrooms in the school became self-contained, and the organization became a combined first and second grade (again using more traditional labeling). Thus, the students who began as kindergarteners continued in the same setting with the same teacher for their first three years of schooling, K-2.

For the recent follow-up study reported here, the classroom teacher and I again made family visits. Of the initial 10 students in the study from this site, we were able to track down seven. We visited six families in their homes, where I conducted the same type of interviews as in the first follow-up study, and I subsequently conducted a phone interview with another family who had

moved to a nearby state. The data from these families help to address issues related to family goals for their children, family engagement with schools, and students' academic performance.

## **Study Design for Second Follow-up Interviews With Families**

Four research topics framed this study:

1. How do parents describe their child's schooling experience and academic progress since exiting from the primary program and completing high school? How have the parents been involved with their children's schools during this time?
2. What are the parents' post-high school goals for their child? What are the child's plans? How do these compare to the parents' goals stated as the children began school several years ago?
3. How have the children performed on state and district required achievement tests as they have completed high school?
4. How do the current data compare to parents' goals and the students' performance in their early years of schooling?

The collaborating teacher contacted the families and made arrangements for the visits and interviews. The interviews about the research topics took place in the families' homes, lasted about one hour each, and were taperecorded and later transcribed to enable descriptions of the families' perspectives about their children's academic development and current educational goals.

In addition, families gave permission to access the children's achievement test data from the high schools the children attended during the time of testing. Collecting the state-mandated achievement test data for each child made it possible to have both the families' perspectives about the children's performance as well as the actual test results. This information helped highlight the children's academic development over time and could be compared to their early academic performance. Further, the results raise issues to consider about the supports for learning needed by poor and working class children and the barriers that must be addressed to ensure their success.

## **Families and Children as Elementary School Began**

### **Family Demographics**

As noted, the initial study involved mostly poor and working class families. Table 1 captures the characteristics of the seven families who participated in both the initial and two follow-up studies.

Table 1. Demographics of Children in Previous and Recent Follow-up Studies

Child					Living with mother with...		
(Race*)	Poor	Working class	Lower middle class	Middle or upper middle class	less than high school education	high school education	more than high school education
#1 (B)		X				X	
#2 (W)		X				X	
#3 (W)		X				X	
#4 (B)			X				X
#5 (W)	X				X		
#6 (W)				X			X
#7 (W)			X			X	

\*B=Biracial; W=White

In 1996, the state had a concern about its high school graduation rate and the number of students who dropped out along the way. Certainly the children of poor, working, and lower middle class were at most risk for failing to acquire even a high school diploma, a basic necessity for even minimal economic security. Indeed, the statewide educational reform agenda aimed at helping more students achieve at higher levels and become able to reach academic goals.

In spite of what the state trends might have been, the families of the young children entering school held hopes for them and their ultimate achievement. The following section presents comments by some of the parents about their hopes and goals.

### Family Goals for Their Young Children

As expected, most of the parents across the sites in the initial study had a variety of goals for their children, reflecting their desire for their children to get educated for both economic and personal reasons. Several recognized, too, how their own educational limitations had impacted their current situations. The quotes at the beginning of this paper reflect just this viewpoint. Another parent shared:

I want him to enjoy life, I guess. Somebody that can take care of hisself (sic) and not have to depend on nobody. I'm afraid that if they [school policies] don't change it where they can't quit or something, that he'll quit when he gets 16 like his daddy did...

Some of the parents wanted their children to be comfortable financially and seemed to know what it might take to "get the good job," but were not entirely sure that this was their highest priority in what they wanted for their children.

For example, one couple offered this perspective:

Mother: I want them to be happy. It would be nice if they had money...

Father:...so they wouldn't have to struggle.

Mother: We never had money, and we still are happy.

Several seemed to combine their goals of economic security and happiness in life with more academic goals. As one mother said, "I want her to be a good-hearted person, somebody who cares about others...wait to get married, wait to have kids, make a life for herself. I definitely want her to make good grades." And another noted, "I would like her to value herself and other people...I want her to have some kind of skills. I believe she needs to go to college. I want her to be proud of herself."

Because of the complexities of the families' goals for their children (to get ahead *and* to be loving, responsible, happy people), the families' goals and the schools' goals—with their primary emphasis on academic achievement—were not always consistent. This, in part, could explain the hesitancy some of the families felt about schools. For many, school was not a place where they had been successful or, for some, currently felt welcome.

### **An Attempt to Know and Involve Families**

As described above, a "funds of knowledge" approach framed the initial study in an attempt to get to know the families, learn from them, make instructional connections that would make learning more meaningful for the children, and involve the families in varied ways. Multiple visits to the families helped to communicate respect for the families' insights. We entered their homes with a view of them as experts about their children, and this perspective helped to open up conversations.

At the end of each year, we asked the parents about the visits. Uniformly, the responses were positive as the following comments convey:

I think it's good. I think it's good for the children to know that, you know, you can interlink with each other and not be afraid or scared or whatever. Be friends. I think it's good for a kid to see the parents and teacher in a different environment than school.

I've enjoyed talking to you, and I've learned a lot about [child]. I mean, just listening to myself talk about him sometimes is like, "Wow, yeah, I really do realize that about him." (Kyle et al., 2002, p. 67)

As powerful as the family visits were in building relationships between teachers and families, they were insufficient for actually engaging them in the ongoing academic work of the classroom. To do that, the teachers used a variety

of strategies. They communicated through newsletters, journals, and informal surveys; they modified homework with “expert projects” and “me boxes” as ways to engage the families, and they (with assistance from us as researchers) held several family nights on topics of interest to the parents such as math and literacy but expanded with such topics as hobbies and game-making (Kyle et al., 2002, 2006).

The teachers further made attempts to modify instruction in ways that incorporated what they knew about and had learned from the families. For example, the teacher of the students visited recently created mathematics lessons about measurement based on information shared by the families during a Math Family Night (Kyle, McIntyre, & Moore, 2001). The families contributed favorite dishes to a potluck dinner and brought along the recipes. The measurements and ingredients then became the basis of problem-solving activities with solutions presented in some kind of visual way, and each child developed a recipe book of all the recipes to take home.

Much effort, therefore, focused on providing the kind of support needed to help the children reach high academic standards and, over time, attain their (and their families’) educational goals. The following section describes the children academically during their first years of school.

### Children’s Academic Performance in the Early Years

The documents we collected, including teachers’ assessments based on student work, contributed to conclusions about each child’s academic achievement. All of the data were compiled and analyzed to create a portrait of each child as a learner and to describe overall performance.

We used the following terms to summarize what the children’s progress meant: *Regressors* began the study with low performance and, over the course of the study, did not gain a year’s worth of academic progress for a year in school; *stuck kids* began school at a low or low-average level of work and did gain a year’s worth for a year in school but no more than that, thus remaining “stuck” at a low level of school performance; *maintainers* began school with average, high-average, or high work and over time maintained their high status; and *leapers* gained *more* than a year’s worth for a year in school, moving from the low or low-average range to the average or high-average range.

Qualitatively through our many assessments, we found that of the children in this one classroom (10 originally), none were “regressors,” nine were “stuck,” one was a “maintainer,” and none were “leapers” in the area of literacy. In mathematics, none were “regressors,” three were “stuck,” two were “maintainers,” and five were “leapers.”

These data suggest that concerns were warranted about whether the children's long-term academic achievement would be sufficient for reaching the educational goals stated by their parents. Most were "stuck" in low achievement in literacy, although their performance in mathematics seemed more promising. The second follow-up study reported here provides insights about what, in actuality, happened with seven of these children.

## **Families and Children as High School Ends**

### **Updates About the Families and Children**

Four of the seven families live in different homes than when we first visited, with one that moved briefly to another state and then returned to live within two hours of the small town of the original study. Six of the seven families have remained in that town or nearby.

All families reflect the same socioeconomic conditions that characterized their lives several years earlier with no major shifts in circumstances. One family who previously lived in a trailer park now rents a small house in a government-subsidized neighborhood. Another family previously lived in one apartment complex and now lives in a different apartment complex. A third family moved from a very modest house in the small town to a similar house in a high poverty area of the nearby larger city.

While one family has both parents continuing to work in professional roles, all other parents work in the same type of clerical, labor, or service industry jobs they have always held. However, in four of the seven families, the parents have changed from the job they held when we first visited to a similar job with another company or business.

Two of the seven families have experienced divorce, with the children currently residing with the mothers in both instances. Neither mother shared information about the father nor how the divorce had affected the children or family situation. None of the families expressed plans for any major changes in circumstances in the near future.

### **Involvement With and Perception of Schools**

Although most of the parents reported attending sports or other types of school events that specifically involved their child, they consistently indicated that their involvement with the schools had diminished during the middle and then high school years. One parent, indicating she would have liked to have been more involved, pointed out, "I just couldn't get away from work." Another, however, placed some of the blame on the schools, sharing that the schools made less and less an effort to reach out to the families:

Elementary school, you hear from teachers all the time...middle school a little less communication, but at the high school you don't hear from them at all unless they [the children] are being extremely bad and disruptive. I never did hear from them that way [meaning positively].

The families also found that teachers in the upper grades tended to place less emphasis on knowing and being responsive to the particular learning styles and interests of individual children. Several comments captured the parents' views of and concerns about the teaching their children had experienced:

Many of the teachers, I don't think motivated him in a good way.... They went about it in a way that he felt wasn't working for him.... What he was being taught, there weren't connections made.

In high school, I don't know if the teachers would all help her if she asked. They'd say, "This is how to do it, now do it." That's not the approach for a hands-on learner.

Consistently, then, these families found the schools less responsive to their children's needs as they proceeded through school into upper grades. Further, they found that schools made fewer attempts at communication with the homes or at working in partnership with the families.

### Academic Performance in the Later Years

The families who participated in the recent in-person interviews provided permission for access to the children's most recent state level assessment tests as well as ACT results. (Note: These assessments were not made available by the parent of the child who moved to a nearby state and was interviewed by phone. However, the parent noted that the child had made As and Bs in school and had earned 15 college credits while in high school.) The following table captures the known assessments of the children in their last years of high school. State assessments use a four-category system of results which include, from highest to lowest: *distinguished*, *proficient*, *apprentice*, and *novice*.

When compared to the students' earlier portraits as generally "stuck kids" and "maintainers" in literacy, these results near the end of high school are not surprising. Only two of the seven students demonstrated consistently proficient performance on state tests; the performance of the others fell in the lower apprentice and novice categories. Further, in the state where all but one of these students reside, ACT scores have been established for admissible college entrance in credit-bearing English and mathematics courses, with 18 being the required ACT score for English and 19 being the required ACT score in mathematics (although a higher score might be needed for a major in mathematics at some institutions). Only two of the six students whose scores are known met

this standard for English, and three of the six students met the standard for mathematics. Since the student (#2 in the Tables) whose scores are unknown was accepted for college admission, we can assume her scores met the required standards in her state and by her institution.

Table 2. Academic Results in High School

Child	2007-2008 Assessment Math	2007-2008 Assessment Science	2007-2008 Assessment Social Studies	2008-2009 Assessment On-demand Writing	ACT 2008 English	ACT 2008 Math
#1	Apprentice	Apprentice	Apprentice	Apprentice	15	16
#2	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Un- known	Un- known
#3	Apprentice	Novice	Novice	Apprentice	11	17
#4	Apprentice	Proficient	Apprentice	Unknown	25	20
#5	Apprentice	Novice	Novice	Proficient	8	15
#6	Proficient	Proficient	Proficient	Apprentice	15	26
#7	Proficient	Proficient	Proficient	Proficient	19	21

### Educational Outcomes and Goals

Visits with and data from the families revealed that all of the children graduated from high school, two from an alternative high school. One girl attended her district's alternative school when she became pregnant, and one boy attended the same school because, according to his mother, he needed the more structured environment to stay focused on his studies. Three applied to and were accepted for enrollment at a state university and began classes in Fall 2009; one began classes at a community college and intended to transfer to a university for the next academic year; one (the young woman now taking care of her new baby) planned to begin community college within the year with the goal of eventually transferring to a university; one began training to become an emergency medical technician, and one who already worked as a volunteer firefighter and a paid firefighter on weekends had been accepted for more advanced training that would lead to full-time status as a professional firefighter.

In all cases, the parents expressed pride in their children's accomplishments. One expressed her feelings this way: "He finished high school and got his diploma. That's something his daddy couldn't do. He [the father] didn't finish high school, but he got his GED." Another pointed out, "She finished and got her education before [the baby] come along. It's hard to try to go to school and tag along a baby and, you know, I didn't want her to have to go through that."

Table 3. Post-High School Education or Training

Student	Admitted to College	Admitted to Community College with Plans for College	Plans for Community College	Training Program
#1			X	
#2	X			
#3				X
#4	X			
#5				X
#6	X			
#7		X		

The parents also felt the goal of their child’s success in either college or other formal training was an attainable one and would be reached. One parent, whose daughter is entering training to be an emergency medical technician, reflected on goals held for her child many years ago when she started kindergarten. She recalled, “It’s always been something in the medical field.” Another parent projected, “He’ll become a full-fledged firefighter...successful—I’m not saying rich—but in the line of work he really wants.” Yet another parent looked ahead, “He’ll graduate from college in four or five years and find a career that would make him happy,” and another joked, “I want her to graduate from college and support me!”

**Insights and Implications About Family Connections and Student Success**

The children in this second follow-up study began school thirteen years ago with a highly skilled teacher for multiple years, an educational program designed to be developmentally appropriate, and a teacher who made a concerted effort to engage families meaningfully and in a sustained way. Further, their parents took part in a longitudinal study which focused on valuing parents as experts about their children, learning from and engaging the families, and changing instruction in ways that connected with what the children and families knew—all for the purpose of increasing the likelihood of the children’s academic success.

Having now interviewed seven of the families about their involvement with schools over time and their current goals for their children, and having examined the students’ assessments of academic progress, what does this study

reveal? What issues does this study raise about engaging families and the supports children need both within and external to schools to be academically successful?

Certainly we cannot claim that having a good start in school with many things in place to support these students—excellent teacher, well-conceived program, family visits—can solely explain the rather surprising news that most of them are either in a college or on a path to get there or in a training program. No causality is claimed or even a correlation. However, we can speculate and wonder a bit.

Even though many of these students were “stuck kids” in literacy at the end of their primary grade years, many were also “maintainers” or “leapers” in mathematics. They had the advantage of having a well-respected, skilled teacher who, although near retirement, was eager to learn the most current, educationally sound practices for teaching young children. This included strategies for teaching content as well as strategies for creating a learning environment based on caring relationships and positive recognition of students’ contributions. Further, most of the students remained in this teacher’s classroom for their first three years of schooling as part of the continuous progress, nongraded emphasis of the primary program framework. Perhaps this kind of start in school exerted a subtle effect on how the students saw themselves as learners that somehow held beyond those early years.

In addition, these students and their families became well known by the teacher through multiple visits to their homes. Not only was the family knowledge respected, what was learned from them became more embedded in the activities of the classroom than might be typical in many classrooms. As a consequence, these children had an increased opportunity to feel a greater connection with what they were learning (even if they didn’t realize it). Also, the parents had increased opportunities to become engaged with the school and to feel as if their perspectives were understood. This way of working in partnership during the primary years might have been more beneficial than initially realized in helping to provide a strong foundation for learning for these children. We can only speculate about whether their learning over time and eventual outcomes would have been different if the connections with the families had not occurred and if the classroom instruction had not been of high quality.

We can also wonder what kind of positive impact on student learning might have occurred if the middle and high schools the students attended had been similarly committed to reaching out to the families, learning from them, and engaging them. The parents consistently reported that communication from the schools lessened as their children proceeded through the grades. Since many students begin to slip academically during these later years, efforts to

establish ongoing communication and effective partnership arrangements become especially critical for student success. Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) made a similar recommendation based on their survey study of 770 parents of students in seventh through ninth grade. According to them, “Also of interest in this study are the perceived invitations from the teachers to motivate parents to become involved at school” (p. 172).

Efforts of middle and high schools, such as those described in the work of the National Network of Partnership Schools associated with Johns Hopkins University, can provide helpful insights and guidance for others (Epstein, 2007). Further, Deslandes and Bertrand suggest,

The findings call attention to the value of personal teacher–parent contacts for building trusting relationships that will be manifested subsequently by parent involvement activities at school and by other forms of parents’ willingness to help. (p. 173)

However, Hill and Tyson’s (2009) meta-analysis of the kinds of strategies related to parent involvement in middle schools that promote achievement resulted in findings that addressed the issue in another way. They found that “...a specific type of involvement, namely academic socialization, has the strongest positive relation with achievement during middle school” (p. 758). By this they mean parents’ conveying to their middle school child their expectations for achievement, the value of education, effective learning strategies, and goals for the future. Schools can assist parents in learning useful ways of addressing such issues. As Hill and Tyson (2009) note,

One of the largest challenges for middle school teachers in their attempts to involve parents is the large number of parents with whom they must develop relationships...Academic socialization as a parental involvement strategy is adaptive for middle school contexts because it is not dependent on the development of deep, high-quality relationships with the teacher. (p. 759)

Instead, they recommend that schools share information about academic socialization through communications between the school and home and the use of electronic means.

## **Closing Reflection**

When we examine the quotes that open this paper and others included about parents’ early goals for their children, we find that they focused on hopes of their children finishing high school rather than envisioning college in their children’s future. Perhaps this was due to their own challenges in reaching the

goal of high school graduation, and so they wanted this goal for their own children. Or perhaps the notion of college attendance seemed too far removed from their family's frame of reference or experience to even speculate about it. Or even if college attendance could be seen as a desired goal, perhaps the cost involved for these mostly poor and working class families made it seem out of reach. In at least three families, though, and perhaps eventually five, the children have essentially surpassed their parents' earlier goals despite the fact that the families remain in the same economic conditions they were in 13 years ago. Somewhere along the way, the children and families set more than a high school diploma as a goal and, at least for now, an attainable one. Certainly they recognized that to be meaningfully educated and employed today takes college preparation or technical training.

Lareau (2000) reported that many educators continue to view some families as not caring about education, and this view especially exists about poor families. However, other studies have refuted the perception that poor families neither care about nor support their children's education (Cooper, 2004; Kyle et al., 2002; McCarthy, 2000; Rogers, 2003; Valdés, 1996). This study offers further confirmation of such findings. In fact, several of these students seem to be on their way to breaking through their family histories to reach a new level of educational attainment.

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