

## **Bermuda's Educational Divide: Comments by Dr. Grant Gibbons**

**April 3, 2007**

Economic opportunity is key to achieving racial parity in Bermuda, and education is key to economic opportunity. That's why we're increasingly concerned about the deterioration of public education on our island and the development of a clear educational divide amongst Bermudians.

Education should be a source of opportunity, not a mark of privilege. People who can't afford to send their children to private schools deserve the same opportunities as those who can. But today, that birthright for Bermudian children in the public school system is in jeopardy.

Our schools may have been desegregated in the 1960s, but in 2007 they remain essentially segregated. Today's de facto segregation isn't based strictly on race, but on class. Two school systems were wrong in 1965, and they are wrong today.

There is an educational divide in Bermuda that's very real and it's confirmed by data from the 2000 Census.

Recent education statistics show that almost 50 percent of our public secondary school students don't graduate in their senior year, and in 2003, the failure rate reached as high as 74 percent.

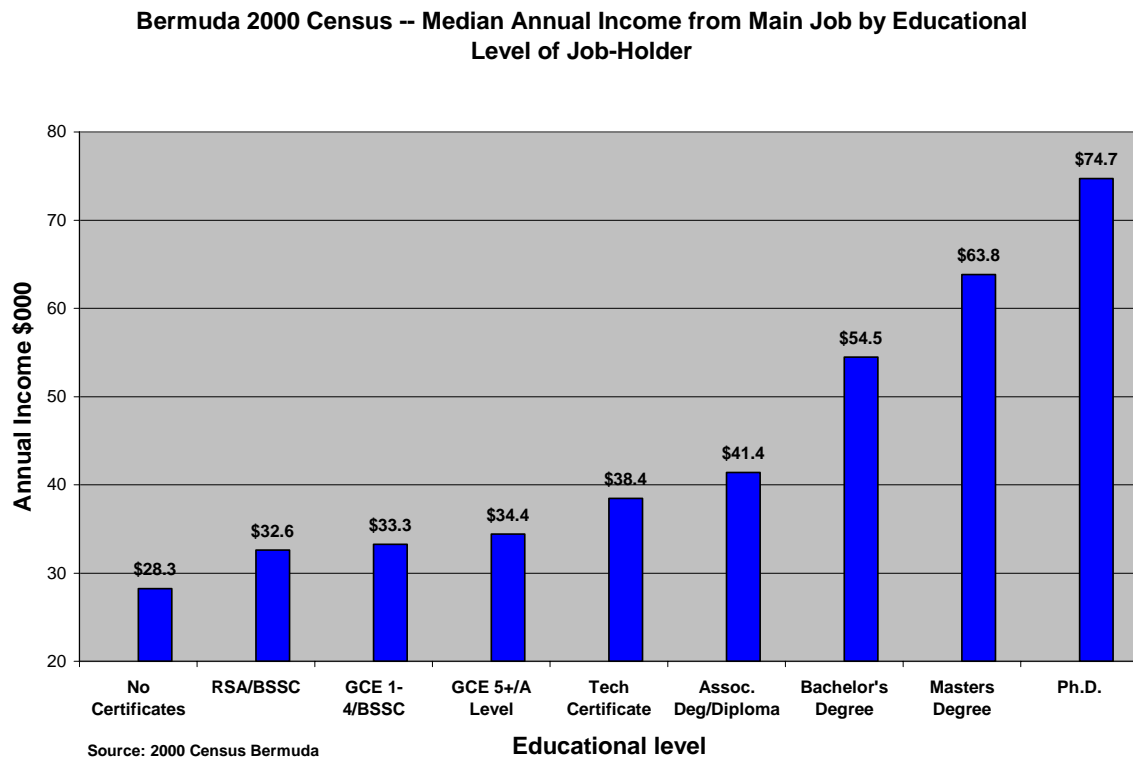
Terra Nova exam results show that Bermuda's middle- and senior-school students have scored consistently below the US average on language, reading and math over the last seven years—and these poor results were understated, because in some years up to 25 percent of underperforming students were not tested. There has even been a steady deterioration of score results in our primary schools.

A dysfunctional public education system has a powerfully negative impact on our social cohesiveness, our competitiveness as a country and our ability to supply educated Bermudians to power our economy. It widens the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

The negative impact is felt in a very personal and disturbing way by young Bermudians who apply for jobs and get turned down for lack of basic skills. They see good jobs in our main service industries go to foreign workers and wonder why. They feel alienated from their community, and they don't understand it. They have every right to ask those questions, and a large part of the answer is that Bermuda's education system failed them.

Data from the 2000 Census clearly shows that income is directly correlated to education: the higher the educational level attained, the higher the annual income. For example, the Census shows that someone without a secondary-school certificate can expect to earn only half the income of someone with a bachelor's degree (Figure 1).

Figure 1



This means that the 50 percent of our children who aren't graduating from our public secondary schools are doomed to a lifetime of substantially lower earnings—unless they are caught by other training programs.

This situation disproportionately affects black Bermudians, given the racial composition of our population and public-school system. They will end up as discouraging statistics in CURE reports unless real reform takes place within the public-education system.

And the situation is further compounded by the overall loss of jobs in traditionally “blue collar” areas and the steady increase in jobs that require a college education or professional training. As noted in a recent report by a group from Northeastern University<sup>1</sup> on Bermuda's labour market:

“The changing industrial and occupations structure of labour demand in Bermuda over the past four years has altered the nature of access for employment for Bermudians. Strong growth for workers in the college labour market coupled with declines in clerical, low-end sales and service jobs has meant that demand for

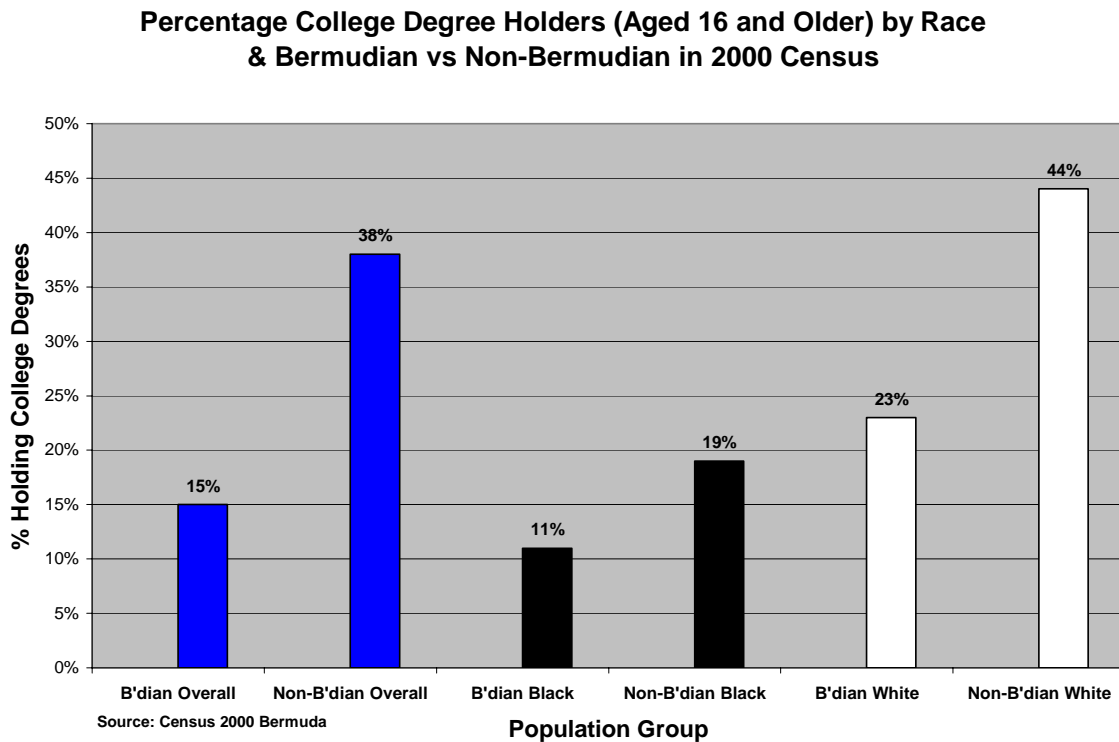
<sup>1</sup> From: “*The Bermuda Labour Market and the Demand for Higher Educational Qualifications for Bermudians*”, by P. Harrington and N. Fogg, from the Center for Labour Market Studies, Northeastern University, September 2005.

workers with higher levels of educational attainment has risen rapidly, while the demand for workers with fewer years of schooling has declined. We observed large gaps in the level of educational attainment between the Bermudian and non-Bermudian working-age populations. Lower levels of educational attainment among Bermudians diminish their employment prospects in an economy that is demanding workers with higher levels of educational attainment.”

The result is clear: an increasing number of non-Bermudians—now over 30 percent of the workforce—need to be hired to fill jobs that Bermudians, if properly trained, should hold.

The existing educational divide both between Bermudians and non-Bermudians and between black Bermudians and white Bermudians is clearly demonstrated by Census 2000 data, which shows the percentage of college-degree holders in the different population groups (Figure 2). The higher proportion of non-Bermudians holding college degrees is not surprising, as employers selectively recruit them overseas for their technical or professional capabilities.

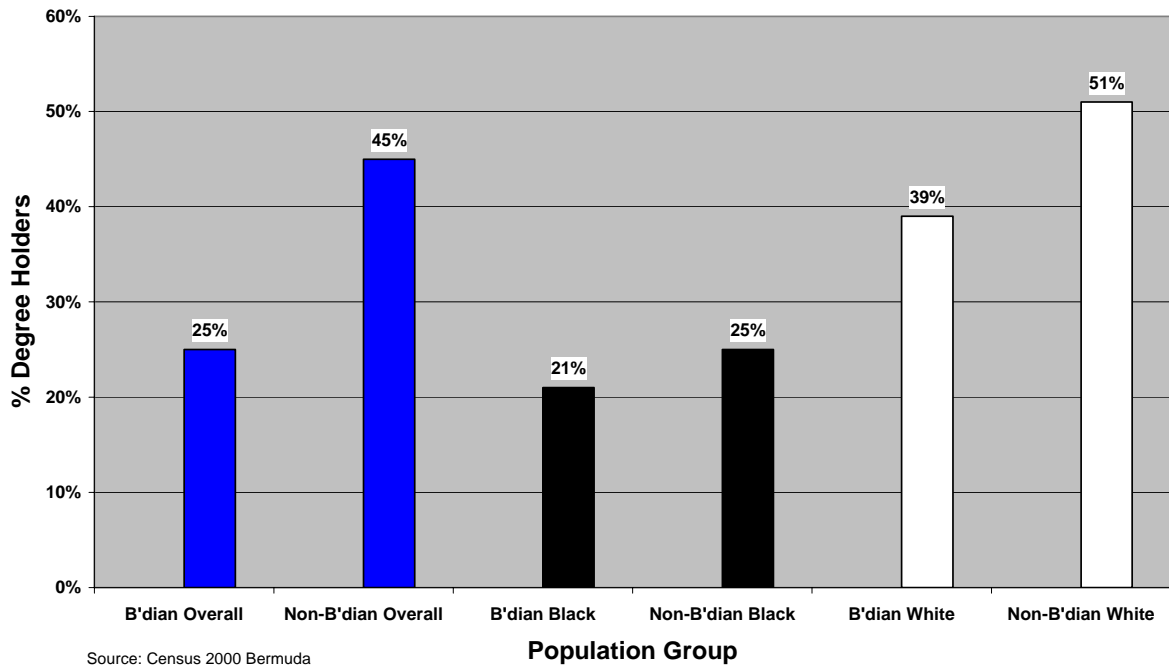
Figure 2



There is some good news. Younger Bermudians are making progress. The Census data shows a higher proportion of both black and white Bermudians with college degrees amongst the 25- to 35-year-old age group (Figure 3).

Figure 3

**Percentage College Degree Holders (Aged 25 to 35) by Race & Bermudian vs Non-Bermudian in 2000 Census**



In addition, the number of 25- to 35-year-old Bermudians (male and female) holding college degrees increased in the nine years between the 1991 Census and the 2000 Census (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4

### Percentage of Male Population 25-35 Years -- College Degree Holders in 1991 and 2000 Census

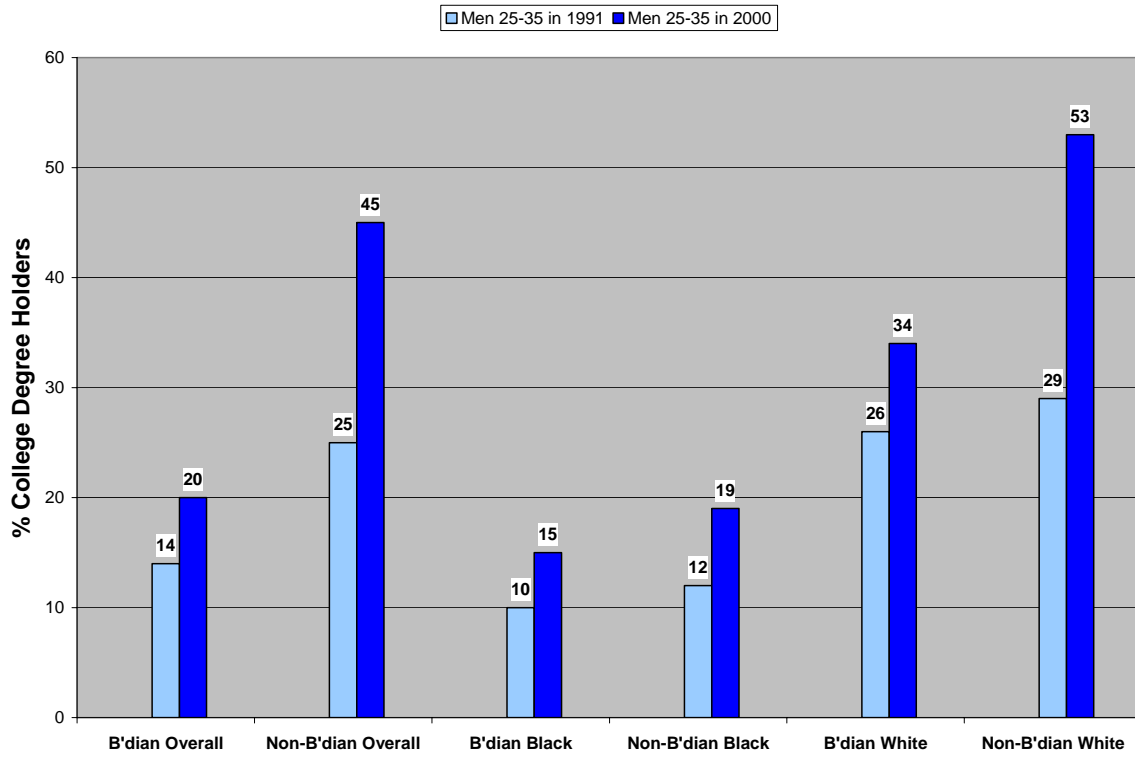
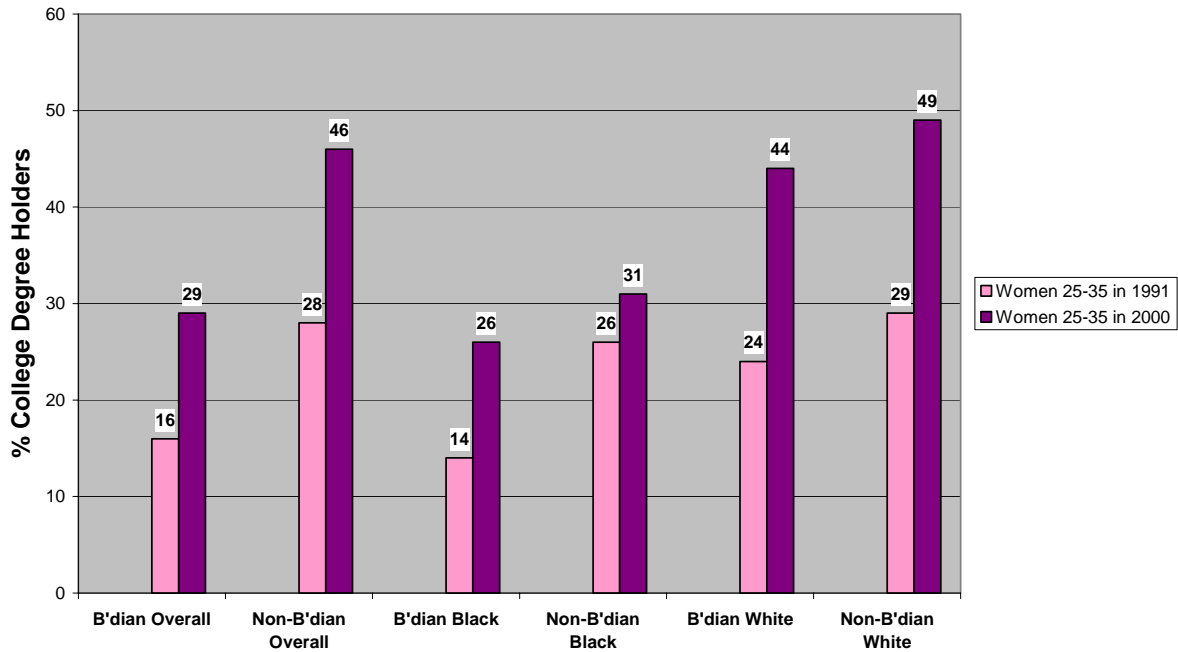


Figure 5

### Percentage of Female Population 25-35 Years -- College Degree Holders in 1991 and 2000 Census



Despite these gains, there is a sharp and unacceptable educational divide between Bermudian men and women and between black and white Bermudians. There is still a dramatic need for improvement.

Unless the recent poor results in public secondary schools are turned around, it is likely that this educational divide will increase, as fewer of these young Bermudians will be able to pursue college programs, and it will be young black Bermudians for the most part who will be at an increasing disadvantage unless the public-school system is reformed.

Deteriorating results in the public-education system, a job market that increasingly requires college-level training and an already existing educational divide—it all points to a perfect storm, a storm that will deny our children the opportunities they deserve and will wreck havoc on Bermuda's future.

Next week: Part 2—what can be done to reform the public-education system and graduate students with the right academic, technical and life skills.

