

“Legal Activism, State Policy, and Racial Inequality in Teacher Salaries and Educational Attainment in the Mid-Century American South”

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Abstract: In the late 1930s, the NAACP launched a campaign to equalize Black and white teacher salaries in the *de jure* racially segregated schools of the American South. By 1960, little racial inequality in teacher salaries remained, and racial gaps in per-pupil school spending in the region had greatly narrowed. Using newly collected county-panel data spanning three decades, this paper first documents heterogeneous within-state impacts of the NAACP’s campaign on teacher salaries. In states that reinforced successful NAACP litigation by introducing universal minimum salary schedules based on objective criteria, the relatively large wage penalty historically suffered by Black teachers in school districts with higher Black enrollment shares disappeared by the mid-1950s. In states that resisted by adopting salary schedules that used the unvalidated National Teacher Examination as a measure of teaching efficacy, that penalty remained and even grew worse in the short term. In the second part of the paper, we estimate the effect of teacher pay on educational attainment exploiting variation in Black salary gains over time across counties with different Black enrollment shares, and across states by whether subsequent state policy reinforced or resisted court rulings favorable to the NAACP. We find limited evidence that Black teacher salary gains contributed to the dramatic increases in school enrollment and grade progression that southern Black children experienced at mid-century.