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ABSTRACT

Efforts to promote greater educational opportunity (compensatory spending, racial desegregation of schools, higher standards, reduced class size, and private school vouchers) have fallen short. Research indicates that middle-class schools generally work well, and any given child will do better in a middle-class than a low-income school. This paper suggests that no school should have more than 50 percent low-income students. Currently, about 25 percent of public schools have majority low-income students. Among the strategies recommended for economic school integration to work is creating an explicit policy that all schools are to have a majority of students who are not impoverished. The paper asserts that the best way to promote economic school integration is the "controlled public school choice" system of student assignment, in which parents are polled about the types of specialty schools that interest them and all schools become magnets with different pedagogies and themes attracting different families. The economic integration approach relies much less on expenditure of funds than leading spending approaches, such as Title I and class size reduction, but the benefits are likely to be greater. (SM)

Economic School Integration
Idea Brief No. 2
New Ideas for a New Century

Richard D. Kahlenberg
The Century Foundation
February 2000

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION
NEW IDEAS FOR A NEW CENTURY

Economic School Integration

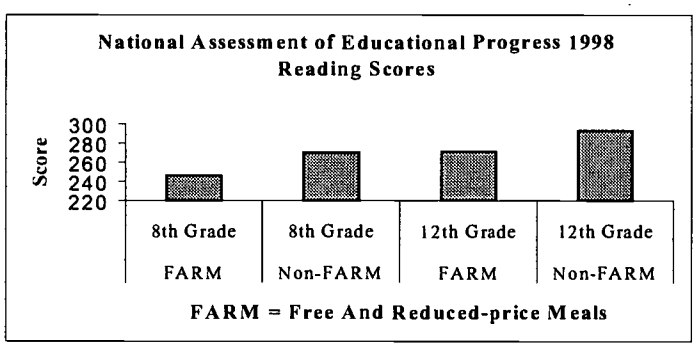
IDEA BRIEF No. 2 February 2000

THE IDEA

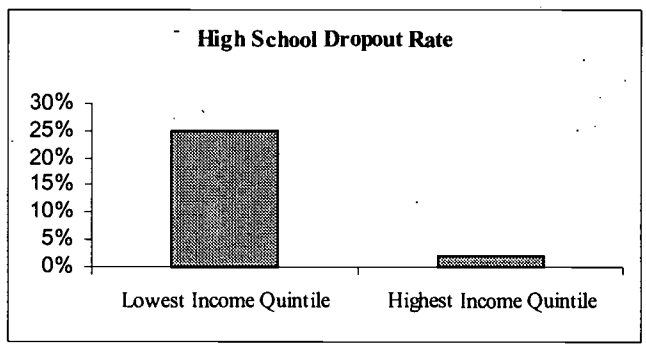
To better promote genuinely equal educational opportunity, every schoolchild in America should have the right to attend a middle-class school. Using a system of public school choice, school officials should ensure that in all public schools, a majority of students come from middle-class households.

THE PROBLEM

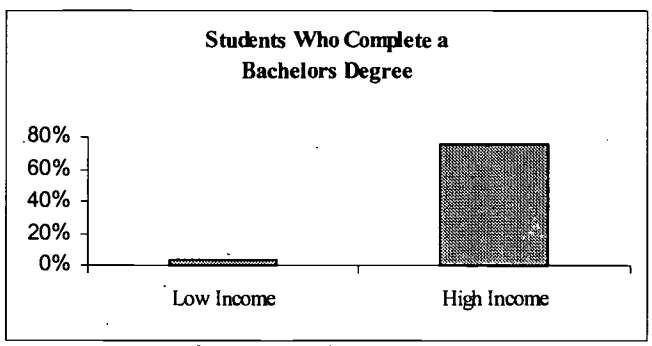
Although public education is America's primary means for promoting equal opportunity – and America's answer to those who seek equality of result – in reality, schools often just reinforce the link between students' family backgrounds and their life chances. Today, the average twelfth-grade low-income student reads at the same level as the average eighth-grade, middle-class student. Students in the lowest income quintile drop out of high schools 25% of the time compared with 2% of students in the highest quintile. And while 76% of high-income students complete bachelors degrees, only 4% of low-income students do. A 1998 *Education Week* study concluded that there is not a single example of a high-performing, high-poverty urban district anywhere in the nation.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, *NAEP 1998 Reading Report Card for the Nation,* March 1999.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, *Condition of Education 1994*



Source: Donald M. Stewart, "Holding onto Norms in a Sea of Criteria," in *Debating the Future of American Education,* edited by Diane Ravitch (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995).

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The two major efforts of the past half century to promote greater equal educational opportunity – compensatory spending and racial desegregation of schools – have fallen short of their goals.

- *Compensatory Spending.* In 1965, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title I of which authorized the expenditure of extra federal funds on schools with high numbers of low-income students. These funds no doubt help provide a better education to low-income kids than they would otherwise receive, but the expenditure of more than $100 billion has not resulted in the gains that had been hoped for. The problem is that inadequate funding is only part of the reason why low-income schools do not perform well. Studies dating back to the seminal 1966 Coleman Report have found that when poor children are lumped together in certain schools, the expenditure of extra funds has little positive effect. A 1997 congressionally authorized review of Title I confirmed what almost all of the previous reviews found: the expenditure of extra funding, in the context of isolated poverty, yields few achievement gains.
- *Racial Desegregation.* Where racial desegregation has been tried and achieved, it has succeeded in raising the test scores of disadvantaged African Americans while not reducing the test scores of whites. But as a legal matter, the effort to promote integration was undercut, first by the 1974 *Milliken* decision, which essentially exempted most suburban communities from desegregation efforts, and second by a set of more recent decisions that made clear that court-ordered racial desegregation is to be treated as a temporary remedy for past discrimination, not a permanent, forward-looking, equal opportunity strategy. Today, even those communities seeking to integrate their schools voluntarily, such as Montgomery County, Maryland, and Arlington, Virginia, are being told by courts that unless they are seeking to remedy the vestiges of past discrimination, they may not count race in decisions about student assignment.

More recent efforts to bring about greater educational opportunity – through higher standards, reduced class size, and private school vouchers – have also proved disappointing.

- *Higher Standards.* Higher standards can have positive effects, but when implemented in the context of economic segregation, standards are unlikely to reduce the gap between low-income and middle-class achievement. Studies find that in order to implement high standards, schools need good teachers, precisely the kind of teachers least likely to be found in low-income schools. In California, for example, a program to raise standards was effective in high-income areas but did little to help disadvantaged kids.
- *Reduced Class Size.* Class size reduction has been found in Tennessee and elsewhere to boost student achievement, but in the context of economic stratification – and a nationwide teacher shortage – class size reduction can exacerbate inequalities in teacher quality between low-income and middle-class schools. In places where it has been tried, class size reduction initiatives have resulted in middle-class schools raiding the best teachers from low-income areas with the promise of a more congenial work environment and often higher pay.
- *Private School Vouchers.* Proposals for private school vouchers are likely to lead to greater, not less, economic stratification in schools and to reduce equality of opportunity. Under most choice plans, it is private schools, not parents, that ultimately choose which students will attend their schools, and such schools normally reinforce educational inequality by cherry-picking the best students. Poor, disadvantaged, unmotivated students are left behind, worse off than ever.

How The Plan Would Work

The good news from the Coleman Report and subsequent studies is that we know that middle-class schools generally work well (see following "Evidence" section). Therefore, the aim should be to encourage integration so that no school has more than 50% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (below 185% of the poverty line). Today, about 25% of public schools have majority low-income populations. We need to integrate that 25% with the balance so that 100% of schools have a majority of middle-class students.

Declare Economic Integration as an Explicit Policy

The first step toward accomplishing this goal would be to declare as an explicit and ultimate public policy that all schools are to have a majority of students who are well-off enough not to be eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. This goal would require many changes, large and small. For example, school policies could require that student transfers will be approved only when they contribute to economic integration. When new schools are built, they could be sited in areas where they could contribute to economic integration. Boundary lines could be redrawn to promote integration. (In La Crosse, Wisconsin, for example, district lines have already been redrawn in the early 1990s to better balance the number of low income kids in elementary schools.)

Implement Controlled Public School Choice

The best way, however, to promote economic school integration, given conditions of economic segregation by residence, would be to employ a system of pupil assignment known as "controlled public school choice." Under this system, parents are polled to see what sorts of specialty schools interest them – back to basics or Montessori; a computer science or an arts-and-theater theme; a French-immersion or an all-day program. Using the poll results to create options that reflect the community's preferences, all schools would become magnet schools, with different pedagogies and themes attracting different families. Automatic assignment by residence is terminated in favor of a system in which all parents rank schools by preference. Choices are honored by lottery, with an eye toward ensuring economic integration. Schools that do not attract enough students are reformed or closed, while popular schools are franchised. The controlled choice system has been successfully implemented for racial balance in a number of communities, from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Montclair, New Jersey, and could be modified easily to promote economic balance.

Using controlled rather than uncontrolled choice avoids the so-called prisoners' dilemma— where people choose based on how they think others will choose. When all schools are guaranteed to have a majority middle-class student population, parents can choose based on pedagogy and curriculum rather than how they think a school's economic profile will turn out.

Controlled choice is much preferable to busing as a method of promoting integration because it adds a right to choose, rather than taking it away. Support for public school choice has grown dramatically, from 12% twenty years ago to 73% today. Because parents would be given an opportunity to choose particular schools that better fit their children's needs, the plan has independent educational merit apart from achieving economic integration. Further, the use of public school choice has been shown to produce benefits from competition between schools and to increase parental investment and involvement in schools.

Establish Interdistrict Plans When Necessary

In 86% of districts, the goal of having 100% of our schools be majority middle-class can be achieved within existing district lines. In the other 14% of districts, which have a majority of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, interdistrict plans will be necessary. A variety of incentives can be employed to lure middle-class children to urban schools—particularly when there is a guarantee of a core of middle-class families. Urban districts can form partnerships with universities, museums, theaters, and sports teams in order to improve attractiveness. In many cases, affirmative obligations under state constitutions may provide a legal nudge to promote economic integration across district lines. Just as state education clauses requiring equal or adequate education have been interpreted to require restructuring of spending, so these clauses may be read to require greater equality of access to nonfinancial resources that matter even more—motivated peers, parents, and teachers. Lawsuits along these lines are pending in Rochester, New York, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, and a variation of this argument prevailed in the Connecticut Supreme Court in 1996.

EVIDENCE THAT THE IDEA WILL WORK

An array of sociological studies dating back forty years suggests that any given child will do better in a middle-class school than a low-income school – a reality that parents with means acknowledge when they shop for school districts. Likewise, the evidence from the racial desegregation context finds that classmates matter; and disadvantaged blacks did better in middle-income schools that were mostly white, not because blacks benefit academically from exposure to whites but because poor kids benefit from mixing with middle-class kids. At the same time, middle-class kids are not hurt academically, so long as schools remain majority middle class.

What matters more than per capita expenditure or the skin color of classmates is the presence of a middle-class culture. The people in a school community – the students, parents, and teachers – drive school quality.

- Classmates provide students with what has been called a "hidden curriculum." Children teach each other things all day long. In high-poverty schools, students have lower aspirations and academic achievement may be looked down on. Low-income kids are three times as likely to be disruptive and twice as likely to cut class as middle class kids.
- Parental involvement is a key determinant of school success, and low income parents, for a variety of reasons, are four times less likely to be members of the PTA, and are less likely to volunteer in class and make contributions to the school.
- Teachers in high-poverty schools are on average less qualified, and four times as likely to teach out of their field of expertise as teachers in middle-class schools. Teachers in low-income schools also have lower expectations; a national study of Title I found that a grade of *A* in a high poverty school is the equivalent of a grade of *C* in a middle class school.

By contrast, students in middle-class schools are much more likely to be exposed to peers with high aspirations, teachers with high expectations, and parents who will ensure high standards.

It is significant that teachers are strong proponents of economic integration plans because they know they can be more effective in schools that have a solid middle-class core. Teachers have been a central impetus for economic integration in places such as La Crosse, Wisconsin; Rochester, New York; and Louisville, Kentucky.

THE COST

The cost of an economic integration program is determined primarily by two factors: the cost of providing incentives to lure middle-class families to previously low-income schools; and the cost of transporting children to newly integrated schools outside their immediate neighborhoods.

On average, magnet schools spend 10% to 12% more than other schools in order to draw students from outside their region, so those schools that are initially under-chosen may need to increase spending by roughly that amount, or to provide other incentives that may be less expensive (affiliation with a museum, use of a popular pedagogy). Transportation for economic integration is likely to involve small overall increases in school expenditure. Today, more than half of the nation's schoolchildren already ride buses to school, less than 5% for racial desegregation purposes. At the height of court-ordered racial busing in the early 1980s, only a fraction of 1% of the nation's education budget went to busing for racial desegregation.

Fundamentally, the economic integration approach relies much less on expenditure of funds than the leading spending approaches, such as Title I and reducing class size. But the payoff is likely to be much greater.

MORE INFORMATION

For further information on this idea, see:

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