Research Brief

How Non-Minority Students Also Benefit from Racially Diverse Schools

By Genevieve Siegel-Hawley

Nearly six decades of multi-disciplinary social science evidence points to important academic, social and civic benefits for low income students of color who attend high quality, diverse schools. Research briefs highlighting key studies that document these beneficial outcomes are summarized in prior "Research Briefs" in this series (see **www.school-diversity.org**). Some of this research has also pointed to benefits accruing to students of *all* races and ethnicities attending integrated schools. Less direct attention has been paid to the ways in which "white" students[1] are advantaged by racially diverse school settings. As described below, diverse schools benefit white students by providing far better learning outcomes. Enrollment in racially integrated schools is also associated with important social and psychological advantages that improve productivity in an increasingly diverse workplace. Recognizing that sustained support for school diversity on the part of white families is central to the creation of stable, integrated schools, this research brief outlines the best evidence to date on the benefits of racially diverse K-12 experiences for white students.

Context: The Demographic Transformation of Schools and a Changing Economy

Last year, for the first time in history, white infants accounted for less than half of all births, according to the Census.[2] That momentous shift in the very youngest Americans is one of many concrete indicators of profound demographic transformation.

School enrollments reflect these broader population trends. In 1970, white students made up roughly 80% of the national public school enrollment—a figure that has fallen to less than 54% today.[3] Enrollments in the country's two largest regions, the South and the West, are majority-minority and multiracial.[4]

Schools are public institutions consistently attended by 9 out of 10 school-aged children in the country[5] and, as such, should serve as training grounds for the world that rising generations of students will experience. Yet in spite of our growing diversity, high levels of school segregation persist.[6] The typical white student in the U.S., for example, goes to a school where roughly three-quarters of his or her peers are also white, even though whites now account for just more than half the national school enrollment.[7] As the research summarized below suggests, racially and ethnically homogeneous school settings do not adequately prepare either white students or their nonwhite peers for life and work in a multiracial society.[8]

As the global economy continues to transition from the industrial age to an era based on knowledge production, flexibility, innovation and risk;[9] today's students should be educated in learning environments that foster such characteristics. Racially and ethnically diverse schools are optimal settings in which to do so, for a variety of reasons further explored in the following sections.

Better Learning Outcomes for Non-Minority Students in Diverse Schools

Diverse schools are linked to a host of positive learning outcomes for white students. These

include more robust classroom discussions, the promotion of critical thinking and problem-solving skills and higher academic achievement.

The presence of different racial and ethnic backgrounds in a classroom is closely connected to heightened dialogue and debate.[10] As Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell wrote, "the nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth 'out of a multitude of tongues.'"[11] In other words, diverse perspectives provide multiple lenses through which to view and understand problems and events. The complex, more flexible thinking that white students develop from these exchanges is an essential academic benefit flowing from diverse classrooms.[12]

Another related advantage is that the wide-ranging and probing discussions that occur in diverse classrooms help generate creative, high-quality solutions to problems. Rigorous research has shown that, when it comes to problem-solving, diverse groups consistently outperform groups made up of experts in a particular field.[13] As one researcher put it, "Scholars from a variety of disciplines have studied how people and groups make breakthroughs. The common answer: diverse perspectives."[14] Such outcomes produce clear benefits for multiple arenas, including schools and universities, workplaces and democratic societies.

Surveys of white high school students experiencing racially diverse classrooms shed light on how the students themselves view their settings. For example, more than three-fourths of white high school juniors in Jefferson County (Louisville), Kentucky reported that discussions in diverse classrooms had at least some impact on their "understanding of different points of view."[15] Nearly two-thirds of white students in the district said they felt "very prepared" for a diverse workplace, with another one-third saying they felt at least "somewhat" prepared.[16]

When classrooms are structured around cooperative group learning—which helps to maximize the benefits of diversity[17]—white students show improved academic achievement.[18] With regard to test scores, the narrowest measure of academic achievement, evidence related to white students in diverse schools is somewhat more mixed.[19] Some of the uncertainty is likely due to methodological issues; for instance, many earlier studies of achievement were cross-sectional (looking at student achievement at only one point in time) versus longitudinal (tracking student achievement over time).[20] What is clear, however, is that racially diverse schools are not linked to negative academic outcomes for white students.[21] And in a number of subjects, like math and science, diverse educational settings are consistently linked to higher test scores for whites. One analysis of 59 social science articles related to school composition effects on mathematics outcomes found, for instance, that math outcomes were higher at every grade level for students from all racial and SES backgrounds who attended racially and socioeconomically integrated schools.[22]

Attending Diverse Schools is Linked to Social and Psychological Advantages for Non-Minority Students

Compared to racially isolated educational settings, racially integrated schools are associated with reduced prejudice among students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, a diminished likelihood of stereotyping, more friendships across racial lines and higher levels of cultural competence. Each of these outcomes are crucial components of white students'—indeed, all students'—preparation for an increasingly diverse society. U.S. employers spend roughly $200 to $300 million[23] dollars each year providing diversity training because too few of their employees are prepared to work with people who come from different racial, economic or cultural backgrounds.

A 2003 meta-analysis of 515 social science studies, spanning 6 decades and 36 countries, found overwhelming evidence to indicate that contact between different groups—such as having classmates of different racial backgrounds—lowers intergroup prejudice.[24] The research showed that exposure to students of other racial and ethnic backgrounds produces more knowledge and awareness of those backgrounds, which in turn lowers anxiety and heightens feelings of empathy.[25] Studies also show that the timing of the contact is important—elementary school age children are both aware of race and most likely to display flexible thinking around what racial differences may or may not signify.[26] Importantly, research has found that students of all races experiencing high levels of intergroup contact were more likely to feel that positive steps should be taken to mitigate exclusion based on race.[27] One study of the Maryland and Virginia suburbs of D.C. that classified districts as either "heterogeneous" or "homogeneous" found that students in more diverse settings were much more likely to use moral reasoning to evaluate racial exclusion. So, for example, students in the heterogeneous district that had experienced high levels of contact with students of other races were much more likely to say that not dating someone on the basis of race was unfair and discriminatory than students with lower levels of contact in the more homogenous district.[28] These findings are particularly important because they suggests that contact with other racial groups not only reduces prejudice, but that it also can help spur white students towards proactive resistance to discrimination.

One of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice is through friendships with members of other races.[29] Meaningful friendships across racial lines go beyond superficial contact with other group members and thus help counter deep-seated prejudices. Schools are, of course, ideal institutions for fostering interracial friendships at an early age. Research has shown that diverse schools are linked to more cross-racial friendships[30] and that white students who have experienced racially diverse classrooms are more likely to view students of other races as potential friends.[31] Diverse classrooms also foster stable friendships between white and black students, with white students experiencing the strongest effects.[32]

Beyond the social-psychological benefits that white students can accrue in diverse schools, the development of *cultural competency* offers a critical advantage in the multiracial workplace and society of the future. Cross-cultural competency refers to the ability to effectively work with and relate to others across racial and ethnic lines.[33] This requires the low levels of prejudice and disinclination towards stereotyping discussed above, and too, an understanding and empathy that can be gained from cross-racial friendships and participation in discussions with diverse perspectives.

Non-Minority Students Experience Long-Term Benefits From School Diversity

White graduates of diverse elementary and secondary schools experience long-lasting benefits that can extend across multiple generations and contribute to healthy functioning of a democratic society.

One of the most important benefits for white students attending diverse K-12 educational settings is that such experiences tend to have perpetuating effects later in life.[34] In other words, white graduates of diverse schools often seek out diverse colleges, work environments and neighborhoods.[35] This cycle can also span generations, since living in a diverse neighborhood often means that the children of these white graduates will attend a diverse school setting.[36]

White graduates of integrated schools are more likely to report an increased sense of civic engagement.[37] This is in part related to the fact that students attending diverse schools feel they have

more opportunities to learn about civic and political issues, in addition to thinking that their teachers used techniques that promoted citizenship.[38] White students who attend well-designed diverse high schools are also more likely to have a concrete understanding of racial and social injustices, which in turn can help contribute to constructive civic engagement.

Organizing Schools to Promote the Benefits of Diversity

Many of the benefits that diverse schools help produce for white students also flow to students of other races. Because we still live in a society in which racial discrimination is built into many of our educational,[39] economic[40] and judicial institutions,[41] preventing the replication of similar patterns within diverse schools is imperative. Otherwise, research suggests that the potential benefits of diversity could be diluted or undermined.[42]

In the nearly six decades since *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided, researchers have produced a large body of evidence related to best practices for designing integrated schools so that they equally benefit for students of all races and ethnicities. Much of this social psychology research is based on a seminal 1954 study by Harvard social psychologist Gordon Allport, who theorized that four critical elements needed to be present in order to foster optimal contact across different groups.[43] Specifically, he suggested that all group members needed to be given equal status, that clear guidelines for cooperatively working towards common goals should be present, and that strong leadership visibly supportive of intergroup relationships was necessary.

In diverse schools, those four fundamentals can play out in multiple ways. Efforts to de-track students (e.g., remove racialized barriers to honors and AP courses, monitor and disrupt the over-identification of black students as students with special needs, and guard against placing English

Learners in separate, full-day English as a Second Language classes) and integrate them together at the classroom level are vital to the provision of equal status.[44] Cooperative, heterogonous grouping in classrooms, along with abundant interracial extra-curricular opportunities like sports teams, can help actualize the process of working towards common goals across racial lines.[45] And finally, highly visible, positive modeling from teachers and administrators around issues of fairness and diversity is critical to the development of strong, equitable leadership.[46]

Concluding Thoughts

Given the history of white resistance to school desegregation[47] and ongoing patterns of segregation and resegregation,[48] it is important to specifically highlight the ways in which white students gain from their experiences in diverse educational settings. Even as white public opinion on the issue of school integration has shifted markedly—polling shows that 33% of whites thought that black and white children should attend the same schools in 1942, compared to 95% today—support for specific voluntary desegregation policies remains tenuous.[49] This brief presents clear evidence that diverse schools do benefit white school children, that those advantages accrue along multiple important dimensions, and that the skills gained in diverse settings are becoming ever more important in a rapidly changing society. White families wishing to maximize the academic and social benefits of education for their children can actively seek out diverse schools, assured that their own children will be strongly advantaged by the experience.

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1   In this Research Brief, we are using the term "white" to denote non-Hispanic white students. We use the term "non-minority" in its traditional sense, interchangeably with "white," even though whites do not have "majority status" in public schools in some parts of the country.

2   Tavernise, S. (17 May 2012). Whites account for under half of births in U.S. *New York Times*. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/17/us/whites-account-for-under-half-of-births-in-us.html?pagewanted=all

3   Orfield, G., Kuscera, J. & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2012). *E Pluribus...Separation: Deepening Double Segregation for More Students*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Civil Rights Project.

4   Siegel-Hawley, G. & Frankenberg, E. (2012). *Southern slippage: Growing school segregation in the most desegregated region of the country*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Civil Rights Project. Kuscera, J. (2012). *The western states: Profound diversity but severe segregation for Latino students*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Civil Rights Project.

5   Reardon, S.F., & Yun, J.T. (2003). Private school racial enrollments and segregation. In R. D. Kahlenberg (Ed.), *Public School Choice vs. Private School Vouchers*. New York, NY: Century Foundation Press.

6   Clotfelter, C. (2004). *After Brown: The rise and retreat of school desegregation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. McArdle, N. Osypuk, T. & Acevedo-Garcia, D. (September 2010). *Segregation and Exposure to High-Poverty Schools in Large Metropolitan Areas: 2008-09*. DiversityData Briefs: A report from diversitydata.org. http://diversitydata.sph.harvard.edu/Publications/school_segregation_report.pdf.

7   Orfield et al., 2012.

8   Jayakumar, U.M. (2008). Can Higher Education Meet the Needs of an Increasingly Diverse and Global Society? Campus Diversity and Cross-Cultural Workforce Competencies, *Harvard Educational Review*, 78, 615-34. See also, Brief of American Social Scientists (6 August 2012). Fisher v. University of Texas. Available at: http://www.utexas.edu/vp/irla/Documents/ACR%20American%20Social%20Science%20Researchers.pdf .

9   Carnoy, M., Castells, M., Cohen, S., Cardoso, F. (1993). *The New Global Economy in the Information Age: Reflections on Our Changing World.* State College, PA: PSU Press.

10   Chang, M. (2006). The Educational Benefits of Sustaining Cross-Racial Interaction among Undergraduates. *Journal of Higher Education*, 430. Gurin, P., Nagda, B.A., Zúñiga, X. (forthcoming). *Engaging Race and Gender: Intergroup Dialogues in Higher Education.* New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. In recent years, much of what we know about the benefits of classroom-level diversity comes from studies of higher education settings. This is part due to the legal challenges to affirmative action, which have spurred research in this area.

11   *Regents of University of California v. Bakke*, 438 265, p. 312.

12   Marin, P. (2000). The Educational Possibility of Multi-Racial/Multi-Ethnic College Classrooms," in Does Diversity Make a Difference? Three Research Studies on Diversity in College Classrooms. Washington, DC: American Council on Education & American Association of University Professors, 61-83. Duncan et al. (2003). Empathy or Antipathy? The Consequences of Racially and Socially Diverse Peers on Attitudes and Behaviors," Working paper, Joint Center for Policy Research, Northwestern University. Antonio et al. (2004). Effects of Racial Diversity on Complex Thinking in College Students. *Psychological Science* 15(8), 507-10. See also, Brief of 553 Social Scientists. *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. School District No. 1*, 551 701 (2007).

13   Page, S. (2008). *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools and Societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

14   *Ibid*, p. 24.

15   Orfield, G. & Frankenberg, E. (2011). *Experiencing integration in Louisville: How parents and students see the gains and challenges*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Civil Rights Project.

16   *Ibid*. See also Kurlaender, M. and Yun, J. (2005). Fifty Years after Brown: New Evidence of the Impact of School Racial Composition on Student Outcomes.

International Journal of Educational Policy, Research and Practice, 6(1): 51-78.

17   Cohen, E. and R. Lotan, (1995) Producing equal status interaction in the heterogeneous classroom. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32, (1), 99-120. Hawley, W. D. (2007). Designing schools that use student diversity to enhance learning of all students. In E. Frankenberg & G. Orfield (Eds.), *Lessons in integration: Realizing the promise of racial diversity in American schools* (pp. 31-56). Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.

18   Slavin, R. (2001). Cooperative Learning and Intergroup Relations. In Banks, J. and McGee, C. (Eds). *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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21   *Ibid*. See also Mickelson, R.A. & Nkomo, M. (2012) Integrated Schooling, Life Course Outcomes, and Social Cohesion in Multiethnic Democratic Societies. *Review of Research in Education* 36(1), 197-238.

22   Mickelson, R. & Bottia, M. (2010). Integrated education and mathematics outcomes: A synthesis of social science research. *North Carolina Law Review*, 88, 993.

23   Vendantam, S. (20 January 2008). Most diversity training ineffective, study finds. *The Washington Post*. Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/01/19/ST2008011901990.html. See also Dobbin, F., Kalev, A. & Kelly, E. (2007).

Diversity Management in Corporate America. *Contexts*, 6(4), 21-27.

24   Aboud, F. E., Mendelson, M. J., & Purdy, K. T. (2003). Cross-race peer relations and friendship quality. International Journal of Behavioral Development, 27, 165-173. Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2011). When groups meet: The dynamics of intergroup contact. New York: Psychology Press. Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90, 751-783. Rosenthal, R. (1991). Meta-analytic procedures for social research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

25   Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2008). How does intergroup contact reduce prejudice? Meta-analytic tests of three mediators. European Journal of Social Psychology, 38. 922-934.

26   Brief for the American Psychological Association and the Washington State Psychological Association as Amici Curiae Supporting Respondents, Parents Involved and Meredith, 127 S. Ct. 2738 (2006). Killen, M., Crystal, D. & Ruck, M (2007). The social developmental benefits of intergroup contact among children and adolescents. In E. Frankenberg & G. Orfield (Eds.), Lessons in integration: Realizing the promise of racial diversity in American schools (pp. 31-56). Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.

27   Killen et al., 2007.

28   *Ibid*.

29   *Ibid*. See also Davies, K., Tropp, L. R., Aron, A., Pettigrew, T. F., & Wright, S. C. (2011). Cross-group friendships and intergroup attitudes: A meta-analytic review. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 15, 332-351.

30   Quillian, L., & Campbell, M. E. (2003). Beyond black and white: The present and future of multiracial friendship segregation. American Sociological Review, 68, 540-566.

31   Wright, S. C., Aron, A., McLaughlin-Volpe, T., & Ropp, S. A. (1997). The extended contact effect: Knowledge of cross-group friendships and prejudice. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73, 73-90.

32   Hallihan, M. & Smith, S. (1985). The effect of class-room racial composition on students' interracial friendliness. *Social Pyschology Quarterly*, 48(1): 3-16.

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34   Mickelson, R. (2011). Exploring the school-housing nexus: A synthesis of social science evidence. In P. Tegeler (Ed.). Finding common ground: Coordinating housing and education policy to promote integration (pp. 5-8). Washington, DC: Poverty and Race Research Action Council; Wells, A.S., & Crain, R. L. (1994). Perpetuation theory and the long-term effects of school desegregation. Review of Educational Research, 6, 531-555.

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37   Kurlaender & Yun, 2005.

38   Jacobsen, R., Frankenberg, E., & Lenhoff, S. (2011). Diverse schools in a democractic society: New ways of understanding how school demographics affect civic and political learning. *American Education Research Journal*.

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45   *Ibid*. See also Slavin, 2004.

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47   Lassiter, M. (2007). The Silent Majority. Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press. Orfield, G. (1969). *Reconstruction of Southern Education*. New York, NY: John Wiley.

48   Orfield et al., 2012.

49   Frankenberg & Jacobsen, 2010.

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