MIDWEST & PLAINS EQUITY ASSISTANCE CENTER

Equity by Design:

Promoting Racial and Socioeconomic Integration in Public Schools

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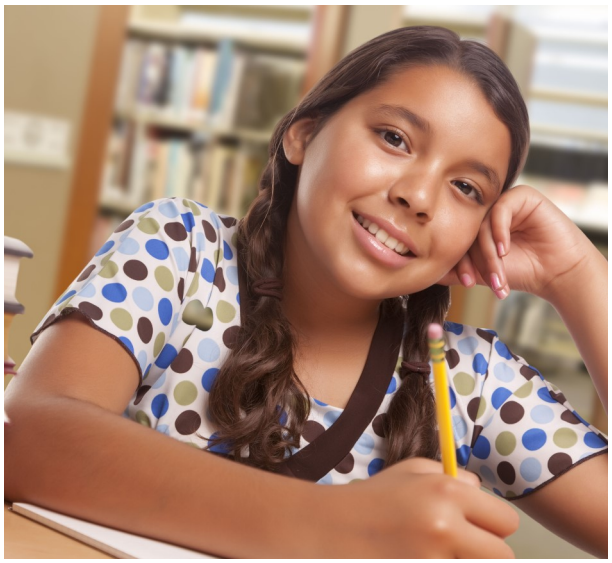
Promoting Racial and Socioeconomic Integration in Public Schools

In one of the last grant programs announced during the tenure of former Secretary of Education John King, “Opening Doors, Expanding Opportunities,” the federal government signified a new commitment to achieving socioeconomic diversity in public schools. The program was designed to support “Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and their communities in preparing to implement innovative, effective, ambitious, comprehensive, and locally driven strategies to increase socioeconomic diversity in schools and LEAs as a means to improve the achievement of students in the lowest performing schools” (U.S. DOE, 2016). Less than two months after assuming her current position as Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos decided to eliminate funding for the program, with a department spokesperson stating “it would not be a wise use of tax dollars, in part because the money was to be used for planning, not implementation” (Brown, 2017). Despite the decision to eliminate the program, it was evident from the 28 school districts who expressed interest in receiving federal funding to help integrate their schools that school diversity is still a desired policy goal. Moreover, the Equity Assistance Network to which the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center belongs, under cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, is required and committed to supporting districts in their approaches to socioeconomic integration while maintaining longstanding efforts toward racial integration of schools. Yet, whether these efforts are pursued may rest solely upon the support and will of local school district officials and state leaders.

Decades of research consistently shows the many benefits associated with racially and socioeconomic diverse school settings, both for academic learning and to better prepare students to participate in a multi racial society (Orfield, Ee, Frankenberg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2016). Students attending diverse schools are more likely to have higher levels of academic achievement, higher graduation rates, increased likelihood of attending and graduating from college, more diverse peer group relationships, less likely to possess racial fears or stereotypes, and have a better conceptualization of race and its impact in society (Linn & Welner, 2007; Mickelson, 2008; Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012; Mickelson, Smith, & Nelson, 2015). Conversely, research has consistently shown that in racially and economically segregated schools, students are more likely to encounter less experienced and qualified teachers, less challenging curricula, and subpar numbers of honors and AP level courses, as well as poor facilities and resources (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012; Pitre, 2009; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Although U.S. public schools are more diverse than ever before, they are also more segregated and unequal. The significant demographic shifts occurring in public schools makes it increasingly important for district leaders and policymakers to be cognizant of the trends around diversity as well as the strategies they can implement to achieve diversity because how they respond can directly impact the schooling experience of the over 50 million children enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools (McFarland et al., 2017; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014; Turner, 2015). The purpose of this brief is to provide an overview of the benefits and potential factors for school districts and stakeholders to consider when developing programs to increase diversity, socioeconomic and racial, in their schools.

We begin the brief by discussing why working towards racially and socioeconomic diverse school settings is imperative. We then outline specific strategies district leaders and policymakers can employ in their communities when considering options for achieving school integration, including a discussion on current efforts around school integration in different locales across the country.



Benefits of Racial and Socioeconomic Diversity

Over 50 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling declared segregated schools to be unconstitutional, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its most recent ruling on school desegregation, nullifying two districts' voluntary student assignment plans that sought to achieve integration and as a result, limiting options for school districts when attempting to achieve racial diversity (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007). While the *Parents Involved* ruling did not completely remove racial factors from consideration when designing student assignment plans to achieve racial diversity, school districts are increasingly more likely to implement socioeconomic based diversity plans as they do not face the same legal scrutiny as race based plans. Indeed, a recent report shows that 91 school districts and charter networks across the U.S. are using socioeconomic status (SES) as a factor in their student assignment plans, which is over double the number of districts that were utilizing SES in their plans just 10 years ago (Potter & Quick, 2016). Further, in the current legal and judicial climate that prefers race neutral approaches to educational policy, it is important to consider the growing body of research that speaks to the benefits of socioeconomic diversity and the role it can play in improving socioeconomic *and* racial integration as well as educational achievement (Reid, 2012). In a country that has experienced a rise in racial unrest in recent years, it may be more imperative than ever to refocus our efforts on diversity in public schools. We argue that as our society becomes increasingly racially diverse and income inequality rises, school districts must work to achieve *both* racial and socioeconomic diversity.

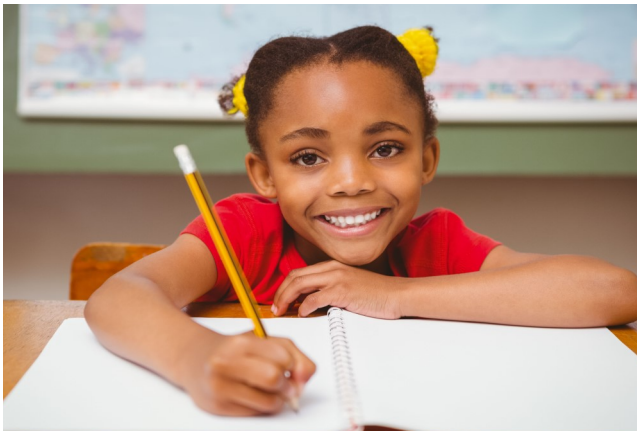
It is evident from the large body of research on school desegregation that when implemented properly, *all* students who attend diverse schools are benefitting both academically and socially. Indeed, integrated schooling is positively related to short-term outcomes for K-12 students (i.e., greater school performance, cross-racial peer relationships, trust and acceptance of cultural differences, and decline of prejudicial attitudes), which bolsters long term outcomes throughout adulthood (i.e., higher educational and occupational attainment, cross racial adult relationships, likelihood of living and working in integrated environments, adoption of democratic values, and greater civic participation) (Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012).

At the height of school desegregation during the 1970s and 1980s, the racial "achievement gap" in elementary and secondary schools narrowed at an overall much faster rate than during the later retreat of desegregation policies and rise of the accountability movement (Orfield, 2011; Wells, Fox, Cordova-Cobo, 2016). During the same time, dropout rates for students of color also decreased with the most dramatic decreases occurring in those districts that also saw significant decreases in school segregation

(Mickelson, 2008; Wells et al., 2016). Research shows that the highest dropout rates occur in schools with high levels of racial and economic segregation (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Students' SAT scores are also more likely to be lower when they spend longer amounts of time in segregated schools (Mickelson, 2006). Recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that when Black and Latino students are not in high poverty schools, they are more likely to have smaller achievement gaps with white students (TCF, 2016). Further, low-income students attending socioeconomically diverse schools have been found to be almost two years ahead academically compared to low income students in high poverty schools (Card & Rothstein, 2006; TCF, 2016).

Integrated environments are particularly important when students are just entering the school system as their understanding of race has yet to be fully shaped (Bhargava, Frankenberg, & Le, 2008). We know that in diverse classrooms students benefit from interactions with students of different backgrounds and perspectives, helping them gain a better understanding of people with backgrounds different than their own, which can reduce stereotypes and prejudices (Wells, Holme, Atanda, & Revilla, 2005). Indeed, students educated in diverse settings are more likely to place a higher value on integration (Yun & Kurlaender, 2004).

Segregation is deepening in our public schools. Black and Latino students are increasingly more likely to face double segregation—segregation by race and poverty and the typical white student is now attending a school that is almost 75% white (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014; Orfield et al., 2016). This concentrated racial and economic school segregation is associated with inequitable educational opportunities, challenges the belief that all children should have the right to a quality education, perpetuates a segregated society, and most importantly, illustrates the continued need for policies aimed at establishing and maintaining integrated schooling environments (Orfield et al., 2016, p. 9). Although the legal path to desegregation is unreliable in the current sociopolitical context, school districts across the U.S. are voluntarily pursuing racial and socioeconomic diversity in their school communities. In the following section, we discuss strategies that can assist school districts in promoting racial and socioeconomic integration, including highlighting examples of current efforts school districts are undertaking around school integration in various sociopolitical and geographic contexts.



Methods to Promote Racial and Socioeconomic Integration

As previously stated, most integration efforts today happen voluntarily at the local level. Yet, not all school leaders and local officials are cognizant of methods available to them that they can employ in their own communities to meet diversity goals. The methods illustrated below are just a few brief examples of types of programs and policies that have and continue to aid integration efforts. We define each program and policy and discuss how a school district is currently implementing said program or policy and what the impact has been on integration and student outcomes. We also encourage you to contact your regional Equity Assistance Center for additional supports or resources as you plan or pursue such approaches to racial and socioeconomic school integration.

Magnets

Magnet schools were initially created in the 1970s for school districts as an alternative to mandatory reassignment by providing a choice for parents among many different school options, each offering subject specific courses or distinct instructional formats (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). Typically established in urban school districts with large student populations, magnet schools work to improve academic standards, promote socioeconomic and racial diversity, and provide a range of programs that may meet the needs of individual students (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). Magnet schools have been consistently associated with improved student outcomes. Further, in an era where school choice is more abundant than ever, including charter, private, and alternative schools, magnet schools appear to stand out as the only form of school choice established for the purpose of racially and socioeconomically integrating schools (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008). In one district, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), which is a large, racially and socioeconomically segregated school system, they have created a magnet and selective enrollment system that seeks to decrease economic isolation and improve student achievement. Using a variety of SES factors, CPS develops a composite SES score for each census tract in the city and then designates a SES tier (1-4) for each of these tracts that is used in assigning students to schools alongside a controlled lottery system. The district's selective enrollment schools are racially diverse, particularly when compared to other urban districts, and low income students in these schools are succeeding academically. However, the most sought-after school in the district is also the least racially diverse (Quick, 2016). School districts interested in implementing magnet programs need to take a more comprehensive approach in their magnet school strategies so they are not aiding in the resegregation of schools. These strategies can include non competitive admissions policies and lottery systems, monitoring demographic changes that occur within neighborhoods so that any census tract data used in admissions processes are up to date, outreach in the community to recruit students with diverse backgrounds, and supporting whole school magnet programs as opposed to school-within-a-school magnets that tend to racially segregate students into two schools (Frankenberg & Siegel -Hawley, 2008).

Controlled-choice plans

Controlled choice integration plans provide families managed-choice options that simultaneously help districts achieve their goals of integrated schools. They are designed to empower parents and their children by requiring them to choose schools of attendance and also work to promote diversity through enrollment guidelines that guarantee space in all schools for all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups in the community. Controlled choice integration plans aim to promote school improvement by using choice data as a referendum on attractive and unattractive schools (Fiske, 2002).

A controlled choice program that has been heavily researched is the Cambridge Controlled Choice Program. Cambridge, Massachusetts was one of the first U.S. cities to introduce a system of controlled choice for assigning students to schools.

Their policy was viewed as a way to offer parents a voice in choosing their children's schools without putting at risk the broader goal of providing fairness and equity in access to quality schools within the district (Fiske, 2002). Cambridge's program was initially focused on racial integration but shifted to socioeconomic integration in 2001 in large part because they anticipated future court rulings like Parents Involved. The current plan continues to meet many of its goals, including an increase in racially and socioeconomically integrated schools, strong student achievement, increase in student enrollment, equitable access to quality schools, diverse student experiences, and a continued array of choices for families. Moving forward, Cambridge, and any other district seeking to implement a controlled choice integration plan, will need to closely monitor the choices available to families and make sure all schools are desirable, particularly when certain types of programs become more sought after by families (e.g., language immersion programs, technology focused programs), so that there is a demand for all schools and students continue to enroll in the system even if they do not get their first choice (Frankenberg, 2013; Learned-Miller, 2016). School districts can also geographically zone their schools to help regulate choice and demand so that white or affluent families are attracted to more than one school in the district; an increase in choice options could result in popular schools being oversubscribed and families less likely getting their first choices, and subsequently less likely continuing to support the plan (Diem, 2012).

Countywide plans

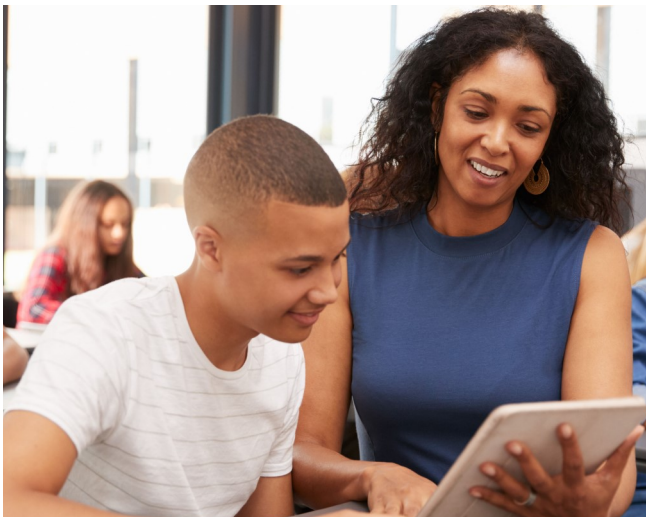
School districts that incorporate both the central city and surrounding suburbs within their boundaries are referred to as countywide districts and by default, have countywide student assignment policies. Many of these districts were created during the initial days of desegregation when court rulings mandated city and suburban districts to merge together to address segregation. While some countywide districts allow students to attend their neighborhood schools, other school districts use a host of factors to achieve diversity throughout their schools. In Louisville, Kentucky, the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) district, one of the districts the Supreme Court ruled against in Parents Involved, utilizes a geographically zone-based plan that divides the county into 13 clusters and includes a mix of students from disadvantaged and advantaged neighborhoods in each cluster, and thereby school, with disadvantaged being defined by neighborhood racial composition, household income, and educational attainment (Diem, Frankenberg, Cleary, & Ali, 2014). Students are assigned to a cluster and are allowed to apply to schools within that cluster (or a district-wide magnet school) with a goal of keeping the enrollment of each school diverse using a diversity index that is established by calculating a census block's average racial composition, household income, and educational attainment. As such, JCPS tries to balance choice with diversity within their schools. Although JCPS has been relatively successful with their countywide student assignment plan, with suburban growth and the development of racial enclaves as well as an increase in school district secession efforts across the country, countywide school districts need to articulate stronger messages around the value of diversity and the many benefits of a truly integrated society.

Inter district integration programs

Inter district school integration policies first emerged in the mid 1960s largely in response to the inability for intra-district policies to effectively establish diverse schooling environments in areas that were becoming racially and socioeconomically segregated (Rury & Saatcioglu, 2011).

While the structure of these policies varies, they are designed to reduce racial and socioeconomic isolation and provide opportunity for students to move across school district boundaries (Wells et al., 2009). Although research shows the academic and social benefits associated with these programs, they have only been implemented in 13 metropolitan areas across 10 states (Finnigan & Holme, 2015). Moreover, while some of these programs have been in existence for over 50 years and are consistently popular and have long waitlists, they are not enrolling as many students as they once did because of funding and accountability issues as schools are hesitant to enroll students that may require more academic services and could potentially lower school ratings (Finnigan & Holme, 2015). For example, the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation program in St. Louis, Missouri, created in 1981 as part of a settlement reached in response to a lawsuit (Liddell v. Board of Education of St. Louis, 1972), served over 14,000 students at its peak; it currently serves just under 4,500 students and is set to be phased out beginning in the 2023-2024 school year (VICC, 2017). Finnigan and Holme (2015) argue that in order for inter-district integration programs to continue to be successful in the future, they need to evolve to have a more comprehensive focus on regional equity. Specifically, they state that funding can be used to incentivize district participation and accountability systems can be set up to reward d districts for increasing diversity within their schools.

Beyond implementing student assignment plans or programs that seek to achieve racially and economically diverse school settings, districts need to be more proactive in seeking and hiring diverse administrators, teachers, and staff to serve our growing diverse student population. Additionally, more efforts need to be made around designing and implementing curriculum that is justice oriented and speaks to issues like race and SES so that students can learn and become aware of societal issues that impact certain populations. Students should understand why we are still pursuing racially and socioeconomically integrated school settings, how and why schools continue to be separate and unequal, why movements like Black Lives Matter and the protests at Standing Rock provide such critical insight into our understanding of racial inequities. Finally, we also need to continue to strive for equitable funding and distribution of resources in our schools as money does matter when it comes to improving student outcomes.



Conclusion

The case for pursuing racial and socioeconomically diverse schools is backed by decades of research that consistently shows the numerous social and academic benefits of attending a school with peers from different backgrounds. This brief argues that racial and socioeconomic integration matters and is still worth pursuing, despite the legal, judicial, and political obstacles in place that make it challenging to do so. Collectively, we can strive to make our schools a better place for children to thrive and participate in the beauty that is our diverse society.

About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequity.org.

Recommended Citation: Diem, S., & Pinto, R. (2017). Promoting racial and socioeconomic integration in public schools. *Equity by Design*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC). Retrieved from: http://glec.education.iupui.edu/Images/Briefs/diem_socioeconomic.pdf

Disclaimer

Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this practitioner brief were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Grant S004D110021). However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

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