

Research-Based State and School District Strategies to Create and Maintain Integrated K-12 Schools

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Introduction

Through racially, ethnically and socioeconomically integrated schools, schools can reap tremendous academic and social benefits for students and the community (Frankenberg, 2017). However, many state and local education agencies do not pursue integrated schools unless they are under a court order to desegregate their schools. Those not under court orders, often perceive such efforts as too complex and politically and economically unachievable.

This section of IDRA's web-based package refers to several, ongoing strategies by state and local education agencies pursuing integrated K-12 schools. Of course, state and school district leaders should also familiarize themselves with these strategies.

Additionally, readers should refer to the Equity-based Framework for Achieving Integrated Schooling (Regional Equity Assistance Centers, 2018). The IDRA EAC-South worked with the other three federally funded equity assistance centers to create this framework that assists communities and their campuses in creating integrated schools. It identifies three critical components in achieving integrated schooling: (1) inclusive, co-constructive planning, (2) school-based supports, and (3) outcome measures. The framework also includes several key strategies underlying each component. Should your state or local education agency require technical assistance, please reach out to your local regional equity assistance center [here](#).

State Strategies

School districts typically develop most desegregation strategies in the aftermath of federal desegregation cases. Yet, states can support integration and prevent racial and socioeconomic isolation in several ways. These include the following.

State Desegregation Funds: In the past, several states have offered desegregation funding to help offset extra costs potentially associated with desegregation strategies, including providing transportation or developing magnet school themes (ESAA was an example of a federal program that also provided funds for school districts' integration efforts until it ended in 1981; Hodge, Taylor, & Frankenberg, 2016). Minnesota offers one such

example of integration funding paired with student achievement (Minnesota Statutes 2018, Section 124D.861, Subdivisions 1-5). The interdistrict desegregation plan in St. Louis arose as part of a court desegregation order, in which the state of Missouri was required to pay desegregation costs. Typically, these costs can be additional transportation, outreach, and/or supporting the development of special educational programs.

District Boundaries: Districts are established to help states carry out their respective state constitutional requirements to provide education. However, school district boundaries are often created along segregated communities. States can address this trend in at least three ways:

- First, they can make it easier for interdistrict desegregation programs to operate. There are a range of administrative challenges in designing programs that move students across boundary lines in integrative ways, including concerns related to accountability. Streamlining bureaucratic hurdles and considering other incentives, such as waivers from accountability for a certain period of time could incentivize participation (Wells, et al., 2013; Finnigan, et al., 2014; Frankenberg, 2007). States should be mindful not to promote practices that lead to greater economic and racial isolation.
- Second, virtually every state has some type of interdistrict choice program, but most do not set desegregation as a goal (Holme & Wells, 2008) and the design of some may exacerbate segregation (Pogodzinski, Lenhoff, and Addonizio, 2018). Consider requirements that transfers promote desegregation in the sending and/or receiving district. States can also support interdistrict efforts by providing transportation subsidies.
- Third, research finds a rising number of district secessions since 2000 (EdBuild, 2019), which has concerning implications for integration (Frankenberg et al., 2017; Frankenberg, 2009; Bischoff, 2008). States should consider changing the criteria under which secessions can occur to limit the possibility that the creation of new school districts will exacerbate segregation.

State Programs: In 2014, New York announced a pilot program of competitive grants to support districts' efforts to achieve socioeconomic diversity, linking increased diversity to a range of educational outcomes (NYSED, 2014). In 2017, New York's state accountability plan under the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act included measures to support socioeconomic and racial integration in the state's schools (NCSD, 2019). Other states could adapt New York's efforts to provide planning and/or implementation grants to districts and identify integration as a research-based strategy to achieve accountability goals.

Charter School Legislation: Most states now permit charter schools, but the specifics of each vary, with important implications about racial diversity, transportation, and other factors impacting student composition (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2011). States could revise charter school legislation to incorporate lessons from the desegregation era such as majority-to-minority transfers, full and/or targeted outreach to families, and providing transportation along with requiring and enforcing diversity goals for individual charter schools and the charter school's effect on surrounding schools in approving or reauthorizing charter schools.

District Strategies

Districts should consider policy design and implementation, including cross-sector collaboration, in pursuing strategies to create or maintain racially and socioeconomically diverse schools. Additionally, there are many resources available to assist districts in this work.¹ The strategies below are designed not only to achieve diverse schools but to do so in a manner that is equitable to all students. These strategies focus on how districts not under a court order can voluntarily increase desegregation since districts under court supervision for desegregation may, in some respects, have more freedom to use race to remedy segregation patterns. Nevertheless, districts under court supervision should begin planning well in advance of achieving unitary status about transitioning to diversity strategies. Previous experiences suggest that it is easier to adjust an existing student assignment plan than trying to introduce a new one if a diversity plan has ended.

Policy Design

In the decade since the decision in *Parents Involved*, districts have pursued a range of ways to define and measure diversity. While research is inconclusive about the best way to integrate schools and what works will vary based on district contextual factors, there are numerous issues to consider and examples of districts' efforts from which to learn.

¹ For example, civil rights groups published a [manual](#) on research and strategies after the *Parents Involved* decision, which also includes fact sheets to use with engaging the public. (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 551 U.S. 701 (2007) is a U.S. Supreme Court decision that weighed the constitutionality of voluntary school desegregation efforts in two school districts. Although a majority of the court held those practices unconstitutional, a majority also acknowledged that school districts may pursue other lawful school integration practices that do not rely singularly on students' race.) There also is a manual focusing specifically on strategies for [suburban schools](#). Finally, [2011 guidance](#) from the federal government identifies permissible policies to achieve diverse K-12 schools, including examples and suggestions for processes to implement school integration practices.

Defining Diversity

In the decade since the decision in *Parents Involved*, districts have pursued a range of ways to define and measure diversity. While research is inconclusive about the best way to integrate schools and what works will vary based on district contextual factors, there are numerous issues to consider and examples of districts' efforts from which to learn.

Race-conscious strategies: It is still permissible to use race-conscious student assignment policies and research suggests that using race-conscious strategies in addition to socioeconomic factors will help districts achieve both racial diversity and socioeconomic diversity (Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017; Reardon & Rhodes, 2011; Reardon, Yun, & Kurlaender, 2006). Examples of districts pursuing such strategies include using racial composition of a student's neighborhood (Berkeley, [Louisville](#); see Frankenberg, 2017 or Chávez & Frankenberg, 2009 for analysis of plans).

Measures of socioeconomic status (SES): One of the most common ways of measuring socioeconomic status for diversity purposes has been using student eligibility for free/reduced priced lunch. For many reasons, this binary measure may not accurately reflect the socioeconomic composition of a student's household, and using other, more nuanced measures while also balancing family privacy considerations is recommended. Some include participation in Head Start or other types of means-tested governmental programs, or Census data for neighborhood characteristics like median household income, single parent households, percentage of home ownership, and adult educational level (Ayscue, Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2017).

Other measures: Some districts have included other measures into their diversity definitions as well. Metro [Nashville](#) Public Schools includes eligibility for English language services and disability, for example. San Francisco gives priority to students living in neighborhoods that have had low academic achievement, called CTIP (Lapkoff & Gobalet Demographic Research, Inc., 2010). Wake County, North Carolina's policy was aimed at reducing concentrations of low income and low achieving students in each school (Flinspach & Banks, 2005).

Unit for determining diversity: Some districts have moved to assess the diversity of student neighborhoods, treating all students within a small geographic unit identically regardless of their individual characteristics. Other districts still rely on individual (and/or their household) characteristics. Finally, at least one district, [Dallas ISD](#), is using multiple socioeconomic measures to assess whether a student's household or micro-neighborhood is low-income for diversity purposes for a handful of specialty schools.

Different Methods of Student Assignment

Controlled choice: This student assignment method asks families to submit their preferences for schools and then a centralized system considers families' preferences, school capacity, and other considerations including diversity goals to make final student assignments. Districts either permit choice across the entire district, as Champaign, Illinois does, or gives students' preferences for choices within a portion of the district such as [Berkeley, Calif.](#)

Attendance zones: Widely used by school districts to assign students to schools, attendance zones can be used to assign areas of differing racial and/or socioeconomic composition to the same school to further integration, including non-contiguous zones that include two areas that are not connected. It is a comprehensive approach that could affect the assignment of every student in the district. Eden Prairie, Minn., redrew attendance zones to achieve more socioeconomic diversity (Eaton, 2012). Such discussions can become politically contentious, and there are examples of districts altering attendance zone plans to ultimately become more segregated (Siegel-Hawley, 2013). A potential drawback is that residential moves and a growing or declining population might necessitate frequent redrawing of attendance zones for capacity, as well as diversity reasons.

Magnet schools: This strategy can be used both on its own or in tandem with other diversity strategies. Magnet schools follow a particular theme and are designed to decouple residential and school patterns by attracting students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Magnet schools encompass a wide variety of designs today – not all focused on diversity (Frankenberg & Le, 2008). The federal MSAP program supports magnet schools that are assisting districts' integration efforts to reduce racial isolation, and research has found that certain features of magnet school design are related to increasing diversity (Ayscue, et al., 2017). These include attendance zones, attractive themes, robust outreach, and free transportation (Ayscue, et al., 2017). However, magnet school design may include entrance criteria that has a disparate impact on students of color and low-income students applying to the schools, thus creating greater segregation. Accordingly, districts are encouraged not to include such policies.

Transfers: Majority-to-minority transfers initially arose during court-ordered desegregation in which students who were in the majority at one school were permitted to transfer to a school in which they would be in the minority. Many districts offer such policies today. Beaumont ISD, Texas, for example, permits a student to transfer from a school that has more than 65% students qualifying for free/reduced priced lunch to a school with a lower percentage of such students (Beaumont Department of Student Services, 2019). Such provisions are often constrained by space availability, which may not be widespread in low-poverty, less segregated schools, and priority in approving transfers.

Implementation of Diversity Strategies

Principles or Goals: Often, an initial step before developing the specific details of a student assignment policy can be adopting goals or principles of an integration plan. Districts should meaningfully engage parents and community stakeholders in the development of such principles and goals (Regional Equity Assistance Centers, 2018). This can help the public understand the rationale for integration in advance of the eventual details of assignment and might help if the district's plan is ever legally challenged. An example is Metro Nashville PS's [resolution](#), which is cited as its goal (along with accompanying rationale) in the [student assignment plan](#) that the district subsequently adopted (Metro Schools, 2017). San Francisco Unified SD also developed several documents, including a report to illustrate the need for student assignment to address racial isolation and their vision for a policy development process (SFUSD, 2009). Jefferson County PS, Ken., has frequently administered surveys of district parents around diversity goals and plans to illustrate widespread support for diversity (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2011).

Transparency: The San Francisco Unified school district adopted a student assignment policy ([Board Policy P5101](#)) aimed to reverse racial isolation in the district and to provide equitable access to educational opportunities. The district annually reports to the school board, with outside expert advisors, about how the student assignment plan is functioning, especially with respect to family choices and racial isolation of schools (SFUSD, 2014). The reports may also serve as a basis for minor adjustments to the design of the district's assignment policy.

Equitable Practices in Choice-Based Policies: A drawback to any type of school choice plan is that there are many ways in which the assumptions of school choice might disadvantage households with fewer resources or stratify students (see Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). Understanding this, some districts have instituted a variety of policies to try to ensure access for all students.

- Berkeley Unified (California) routinely sets aside a small number of seats in highly select schools to permit families moving into the district after the student assignment process has occurred – usually six months prior to enrollment – the opportunity to attend sought-after schools (Chávez & Frankenberg, 2009). Berkeley also carefully managed wait lists for schools filled to capacity to try to ensure equity.
- Other districts, such as Jefferson County PS, engage in a wide variety of activities to inform parents of their school options and to support families in the application process, including providing online access, so that they are also able to submit their choices in a timely fashion (JCPS, 2018).
- Districts should carefully monitor whether all groups living in the district have access

to all schools, and how equitable choices are granted to consider whether practices should be implemented to improve equity.

Transportation: As many student assignment policies must often overcome high residential segregation, providing transportation can be a critical component of district diversity efforts. For decades, transportation was part of court-ordered desegregation efforts. While many districts cut transportation in the last decade as a cost-savings measure, this may limit the effectiveness of all of the methods of student assignment described above. Some districts have partnered with public transit agencies and/or consultants to make transportation more efficient in supporting diverse schools (among other district goals). For example, Metro Nashville PS offers [public transportation bus passes](#) to any students who qualify for free/reduced price lunch and are attending choice schools.

Monitor Effect of Non-Diversity Factors: Diversity is only one of a school district's priorities in student assignment, and other factors often include some type of priority for proximity (either in choice-based plans or in drawing attendance zones) that might negate the effectiveness of diversity factors. If drawing zones, districts should make sure they are diverse (examples include Berkeley and [Montclair](#)). Grandfathering or giving preferences to siblings may reflect other district priorities, but they might also slow the effect of any changes in diversity strategies since both practices would reinforce existing composition of school. Finally, academic pre-requisites or tests for admissions may also limit access for some students.

Use of Special Programs: Similar to the use of magnet schools, special educational programs are frequently used by districts, in combination with other district strategies, to strategically draw students to schools to increase diversity. Nashville specifically mentions [strategic selection](#) in locating programs as a diversity initiative.

Connect to Other District Decisions: It is beyond the purview of this strategy document to detail all of the district decisions that may affect diversity efforts. (Metro Nashville PS [lists some of the district decisions](#) they viewed as possibly affecting their school diversity efforts.) District decisions should be reviewed with an understanding of how they might unintentionally harm diversity efforts, particularly in building, closing, or renovating schools. Other strategies like altering grade configuration might aid integration efforts like grade configuration (Glenn, 2010).

Cross-Sector Collaboration: While [research](#) and federal policy guidance is supportive of developing cross-sector collaboration with other agencies to support school diversity efforts (Tegeler, 2015; Denton, 1996; Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2013), there are fewer examples of this in practice. In 2016, the federal government released a guidance letter suggesting ways state and district transportation, housing and education agencies could work together to support diversity (Castro, King & Foxx, 2016). One example of how housing

diversity efforts also helped low-income children attend more diverse schools is in Montgomery County, Md. (Ayscue, 2017); earlier interdistrict program happened in metropolitan Chicago as a result of the Gautreaux court case (Rosenbaum, 1995).

In addition, the IDRA EAC-South collaborated with the Poverty & Race Research Action Counsel to create an accompanying literature review and best practices documents (cite). These tools can help districts and states better understand the cross-sector issues in housing, education and transportation and identifies best practices in the field.

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