School Integration

How It Can Promote Social Cohesion and Combat Racism

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By Richard D. Kahlenberg, Halley Potter, and Kimberly Quick

Public schools have always been meant to provide all children with the skills and knowledge to become successful participants in the economy. But in the age of Donald Trump, a second important purpose of public education has become more salient: to promote social cohesion in a diverse and fractured democracy. As ugly and naked racism in America is further unveiled, how can schools be a tool for combating racism and promoting unity?

Ideas on a way forward can be found in the Supreme Court's landmark 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The court was explicit in describing the damage that school segregation inflicted on children of color. Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote in the unanimous opinion, "To separate [black students] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone."[1]

Less discussed, both in the court opinion and in public discourse, is the body of research that outlines the educational and moral damage that segregation inflicts on white children. In the Appendix to the Appellants' Briefs submitted by the NAACP, psychologists and social scientists warned that segregation teaches white children to "gain personal status in an unrealistic and nonadaptive way," preventing them from developing the skill of self-evaluation based on their own merits and abilities. The researchers noted that white children, in an effort to square the racial caste system they witness with the messaging of a meritocratic "American dream," often internalize false narratives and develop unhealthy coping mechanisms "in an attempt to protect themselves from recognizing the essential injustice of their unrealistic fears and hatreds of minority groups."[2]

The researchers go on to state that this misalignment of stated American values and shown American racism causes some children to respond by intensifying hostility toward people who are different than them, or by "developing an unwholesome, rigid, and uncritical idealization of all authority figures—their parents [and] strong political and economic leaders." In short, school

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segregation—an anti-democratic and racist practice—develops these same negative traits in the children who experience it.

Segregation harms both students of color and white students, and it damages the social fiber of the nation. This country's refusal to un-design the systems devised to separate and marginalize has resulted in racial animus, social discord, and cultural ignorance. But this need not be our inheritance. Just as segregation causes and is caused by racism and white supremacy, school integration can be a powerful anti-racist tool.

At a time when our democracy is fractured along the fault lines of race, ethnicity, and religion, and when social mobility has stalled, high-quality integrated public schools could take us on a better path forward. Racial and socioeconomic school integration has proven to be one of the most powerful strategies known to educators to improve the lives of students and reduce national division.

School Integration Produces Civic and Socioemotional Benefits for All Students

Racially and socioeconomically diverse schools offer students of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds important socioemotional benefits by exposing them to peers of different backgrounds. The increased tolerance and cross-cultural dialogue that result can help build social cohesion and strengthen civil society. A robust body of evidence backs this up.

Attending a diverse school can help reduce racial bias and counter stereotypes. First, studies indicate that attending a diverse school can help reduce racial bias and counter stereotypes. Once formed, attitudes and beliefs about groups with different identities become harder to change as one becomes older, meaning that early exposure to difference offers the greatest chance for bias and stereotype reduction. In fact, white people who report having meaningful contact with black people during their childhoods report lower levels of racial prejudice in adulthood.[3] Similarly, longitudinal research revealed that, at least for white children and teens, a greater number of cross-race friendships predict more positive attitudes toward racial and ethnic minorities over time.[4] Due to the duration and consistency of children's time in schools, these settings are the perfect venues to expose children to people of different backgrounds.

Long-term studies of high school and university students from the United States, Europe, and South Africa confirm that positive contact between students from different racial and ethnic groups predicts lower levels of anxiety in relations with them.[5] Reduced racial anxiety directly and favorably impacts people's willingness to engage across race and avoid subscribing to stereotypes. Empathy toward other groups also develops through intergroup contact.

Students who attend integrated schools are more likely to seek out integrated settings later in life. Young children's experiences with intergroup contact have long-term consequences: research shows that plentiful, positive early cross-group interactions result in increased comfort living and working in diverse environments as adults.[6]

Particularly for young people, the ability to form cross-cultural relationships in school settings can be extremely powerful. Friendship bonds, even when developed at an individual level, actually transform people's understandings of relationships between groups. This means that as young people develop friendships with people of different backgrounds, they are more likely to treat members of their friends' groups as well as they would treat members of their own.[7] Moreover, white children in diverse schools are more likely to believe that children from different ethnic backgrounds can become friends, and they are more likely to select children from other ethnic groups as their own friends.[8] Regarding diversity, the impressionability of youth is an asset to progress: research suggests that merely seeing classmates of their same race interacting with classmates of other races can create greater comfort and exposure that increases young people's interest in interacting with people of different backgrounds.[9]

Critically, this openness and resistance to stereotyping carries forward into adulthood. Several studies have found that students who attend racially diverse schools are more likely to express interest in having neighbors of different races and to live in diverse neighborhoods.[10]

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Integrated classrooms can improve students' satisfaction, intellectual self-confidence, and leadership skills. Research on diversity at the college level[11] shows that when students have positive experiences interacting with students of other backgrounds and view their campus' racial and cultural climate as affirming, they emerge with greater confidence in their own academic abilities. In a 2005 study conducted at the University of Michigan, students with more "diversity" experiences—enrollment in diversity-related coursework and interactions with diverse peers—scored higher on measures of academic self-confidence, social agency, and critical thinking.[12] This increased confidence is founded in the evidence: the rich environment provided by integrated school settings allows learners to think more critically, hear and analyze a multitude of perspectives, and learn to work collaboratively.

Diverse educational environments also help grow and develop leadership skills in young people, largely because prejudice reduction is a key component to leadership in the 21st century. A longitudinal study of college students found that the more often first-year students were exposed to diverse educational settings, the greater their "gains in leadership skills, psychological well-being, intellectual engagement, and intercultural effectiveness."[13] Exposure to diversity also helps to improve civic engagement, such as participation in community activities and organizations. A 2011 study tracked students for 13 years after their graduation from college and found that diverse experiences were positively related to personal growth, purpose in life, and volunteering.[14] A meta-analysis of 27 studies on the relationship between diversity and civic engagement found that college diversity experiences are positively related to increased civic engagement. This same analysis indicated that while coursework that focused on underrepresented people or discussed diversity was posi-

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tive, it neither replaced nor had as strong an effect on student outcomes as did actual face-to-face cross-racial interaction.[15]

Unlocking the Social and Emotional Benefits of School Integration

A substantial body of evidence both indicts segregation and illuminates the many ways that school integration can be a step toward racial healing. These well-documented benefits, however, are often stymied when schools achieve only numerical diversity without truly taking steps to maximize relationship building across racial and economic difference.

In order to realize the benefits of integration, many demographically diverse schools have taken important steps to ensure that their commitment to integration transcends superficial demographic measures. These schools have purposely implemented structures and programs to foster greater contact between people of different backgrounds, to focus on equity and justice, and to block the re-creation of segregated spaces within classrooms.

Fostering Meaningful Intergroup Contact within Diverse Schools

Schools and systems that successfully move beyond numerical diversity to encourage meaningful interactions across lines of difference typically have (1) well-established, supportive norms, and (2) plentiful opportunities and encouragement of cross-racial and cross-class friendships, as well as academic/pedagogical practices that reaffirm cross-cultural cooperation.[16]

Supportive Norms

When visiting Morris Jeff Community School, a small unionized charter school in New Orleans, the genuine affection that the students have for each other stands out, perhaps even more than the school's rigorous arts program or International Baccalaureate curriculum. Children of different races, economic circumstances, cultures, and ability levels learn and play together effortlessly, romping in the gymnasium during a morning meeting and giggling together in the cafeteria, surrounded by flags from around the world. Yet, according to the faculty, creating this ease was far from easy; the school's commitment to building a foundation of inclusivity and support was baked into its model from the beginning.

For students, school-fostered supportive norms signal the value and expectations that the school community places on forming cross-group friendships.[17] These standards are disseminated both through direct programming with students and, critically, through the culture set by the adults in the building, which students closely observe.

To maximize the benefits of integration, schools should work to establish a culture that normalizes and encourages relationships across lines of difference in educational settings. Successful schools dedicate time and resources to ensure that teachers, staff, and administrators have the tools to model positive intergroup contact—with an emphasis on ensuring that such contact prioritizes equity by making space for and critically listening to the voices of marginalized populations. Secondly, these schools recognize the role of the institution within its surrounding community by showing students the challenges, joys, and importance of understanding community dynamics when forming relationships and making choices.[18]

One such tool is simply clear, shared definitions and goals. Terms such as diversity, inclusion, integration, anti-bias, and anti-racism carry different meanings to people with different values and experiences; therefore, schools should consider having internal conversations about the significance, bounds, and definitions of each of these terms in order to productively establish norms and procedures. Simultaneously, all adults who interact with children and/or make administrative decisions should be prepared to model healthy and meaningful intergroup relationships. In order to ensure that this happens, schools must first take inventories of their racial climates, strongly incentivize or mandate appropriate training and conversation, and implement structures that solidify equitable and meaningful communication practices.[19]

Finally, in working to establish norms of inclusivity and justice, schools need to acknowledge that the challenges of cross-cultural and cross-racial engagement do not end at the schoolhouse door. Public schools are community actors whether or not they intentionally engage with these issues—that is to say, schools can both reflect and alter neighborhood demographics; school buildings occupy critical spaces within a neighborhood; and, depending on admissions procedures, schools typically educate and offer services to children and families in their surrounding areas. As such, a school that engages in constant outreach with its surrounding community fosters an environment in which students from diverse backgrounds are better understood and can see positive examples of cross-racial adult communication and relationships.[20]

Additionally, this models democratic principles and emphasizes that the school itself is part of a diverse society, and that it is obligated to respect a variety of perspectives, elevate the voices of marginalized groups, and evaluate its position in a multiethnic community.

Encouraging Friendships and Academic Cooperation

Teachers and school leaders have found creative ways to ensure that students in diverse schools have social time that is also structured, supervised, and productive. Supportive, intentionally diverse assigned spaces help anchor students' days in the values of inclusion and multicultural interaction. Some examples of methods include:

- "Advisories"—or special homeroom or flex periods curated for racial, economic, linguistic, and ability diversity—can help students connect both with one another and with a teacher mentor/adviser. These periods can be used for fun group-building activities, personal or political discussions, or time for teachers to check in on students.

- Several schools use "morning meetings," brief all-grade gatherings prior to the start of classes, to set a tone of team building, cordiality, and democracy.
- Other integrated schools encourage or facilitate playtime by organizing small group outings for students and parents who would otherwise be unlikely to interact.

Throughout these programs, it is critical that teachers and administrators pay particular attention to how existing student relationships cross lines of similarity and difference and respond accordingly. Teachers can mitigate homogeneity by assigning diverse teams for games and activities, or by designating buddies for homework or other assignments.

Combating "Second Generation" Segregation

In order to harness the full set of academic, social, and civic benefits that racially and economically mixed settings have been shown to offer, schools with diverse student bodies should also have integrated classrooms.[21] Even at schools with diverse enrollment, though, this is not always the case: academic tracking can create situations in which students learn in siloes among lines of race and class.[22]

Academic tracking—and the racial and socioeconomic segregation it often creates—raises a number of concerns about equity. First, academic tracking and other forms of homogeneous ability grouping, such as gifted programs, frequently do a poor job at the main goal they are designed to achieve: sorting students by ability. Research suggests that, aside from their academic preparedness and ability, students' degree of privilege[23]—in the form of families' resources, access to test prep, and social capital, as well as the implicit biases of staff and teachers—may come into play.[24] Second, data shows that academic tracking harms students assigned to lower tracks, who show reduced achievement and increased gaps over time as compared with peers with similar initial achievement assigned to higher-level courses.[25] Third, when classrooms are skewed by race and class, students are robbed of some of the peer interactions and access to social networks that diversity can provide.[26] Finally, when rich and poor students, or white students and students of color, are by and large in different academic programs, the equalizing power of integration—which helps to promote equal distribution of resources—is weakened.

By contrast, when differentiation in integrated classrooms is done well, it is possible to reduce the achievement gap while maintaining or increasing the performance of all student subgroups.[27] In these settings, all students have access to a challenging curriculum, and the instructional methods, not the standards, are differentiated to meet students' needs.[28] Two particularly promising approaches are schoolwide enrichment and an open/embedded honors option.

Schoolwide Enrichment in Queens

The Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM), developed by University of Connecticut professors Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis, is an approach to teaching and learning that draws from the pedagogy of gifted education to enhance opportunities for all students in a school. SEM identifies "gifted behaviors," including above-average academic abilities, creativity, and task commitment, rather than attaching to students a binary ("gifted"/"not gifted") label. "Enrichment clusters" are one of the core elements of SEM. These enrichment opportunities, which can be pull-out groups or whole-school programs, bring together students who share a broad common interest—such as math, athletics, or social action—guiding students in developing specific topics and projects to undertake within that umbrella theme. Although the groups are organized around a shared interest, they are heterogeneous in terms of ability, and creative lesson designs allow students to bring individual strengths and interests to shared group projects. Some of the students in an enrichment group might show high ability in the targeted area, whereas others might show deep interest or creativity.

In Queens, New York, two recently founded public schools use SEM as a core part of their approaches: BELL Academy, a middle school that opened in 2007, and Veritas Academy, a high school that opened in 2013.

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All students at these schools participate in enrichment clusters—which at BELL happen concurrently during a schoolwide enrichment cluster block and at Veritas are scheduled throughout the day as electives. The schools develop the topics for enrichment clusters by asking staff—including teachers, administrators, social workers, community resource specialists, and others—about skills, experiences, or hobbies they have that could form the basis of a cluster, and then matching those with student interests. Cheryl Quatrano, one of the cofounders of both schools, emphasizes three important elements for successful enrichment clusters:

- *Student voice in shaping topics and projects.* In Quatrano's words, "students [should be] writing curriculum with their teachers."
- *A culminating product that gives back to the community.* For example, students in one school's photography enrichment cluster decided to sell notecards featuring their photographs. They used the profits to purchase a camera, which they donated to a children's hospital for young patients to use.
- *Ways for all students to contribute.* "It creates equity and access for all—students with disabilities, ESL [English as a second language] students, struggling students, [and] advanced students," Quatrano explains.[29]

At BELL and Veritas, teachers are also trained to infuse SEM methods into the regular curriculum to help them differentiate instruction. In order to challenge and engage students at appropriate levels, both schools' teachers keep student interests (compiled through surveys) and academic assessment data in mind. Teachers use an online database to find individualized reading materials that match each student's reading level and topics of interest.

Open Honors at Harvest Collegiate

At the high school level, one method of meeting the needs of students at different academic levels within integrated classrooms is to offer an "open honors" or "embedded honors" option. In this model, all students take a class together, but students who choose to may take the class for honors credit by completing extra assignments. This model offers two major advantages for students: they have access to heterogeneous classes in which students can learn with and from a diverse group of peers, and students do not have to rearrange their schedules to have access to more challenging or advanced coursework.

Harvest Collegiate High School, an unscreened, diverse New York City public school, serves around 500 students and offers an open honors program in all classes except for Advanced Placement classes.[30] At the beginning of the year, students can apply for open honors in any of their classes—a process which usually consists of writing a short statement about their interest—and they can switch in or out of honors during a monthlong add/drop period at the beginning of the course.

Open honors work might include developing math functions to advocate for a public policy that students are interested in, serving as a peer writing tutor for an English class, or researching an additional historical event for a social studies class. Students have the opportunity to capitalize on certain interests as they arise during the school year; for instance, one year, the school supported a group of honors students from several global history classes who decided to host a daylong human rights conference for the whole school. About 25 percent of students participate in open honors over the course of the academic year. Teachers and administrators monitor the enrollment numbers and demographic makeup of the students who participate in the program, and they will intervene if and when they notice disparities.

Segregation inhibits imagination, robbing children of the ability to see and experience the fullness and potential of this nation. It stifles productive civic engagement by negatively influencing who kids see as equal and worthy citizens. And it teaches children that America lacks the will and resiliency to correct and progress beyond its original sins of racism and subjugation of those lacking power.

Harvest Collegiate High School

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Our schools—how equitable, diverse, and just they are—both reflect this nation's values and create them in the next generation of Americans. The good news is that school integration, when followed through with strategies fostering intergroup contact and detracking, gives children the social, emotional, and interpersonal tools to combat racism and build a better nation. ☐

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Developing Inclusive Youth

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Group identity, though, along with negative messages from adults and the media, often perpetuates in-group preference, which fosters out-group dislike. It is of paramount importance to determine how best to reduce prejudice early in life, not only because by adulthood prejudice is deeply entrenched and difficult to change, but also for facilitating healthy development and motivating children to enjoy school and achieve academically. □

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