

The Path of Diversity in K–12 Educational Institutions

By Richard C. Hunter, Ed.D.

The U.S. Supreme Court's recent decisions in cases involving school districts in Seattle, Washington, and Louisville, Kentucky, seem to indicate that the United States is moving away from diversity in its public schools. In *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007) and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education* (2007), the high court forbade those districts from assigning pupils to schools based on race, even when their efforts reduced racial isolation and increased student diversity.

Legal experts predicted that the Supreme Court would strike down the use of race-conscious admission policies in the public schools in these two cases because of the change in the Court's composition (Asquith 2006). Chief

Justice Roberts and Justice Alito are conservatives and are ideologically opposed to using race as a criterion for assigning pupils in public schools, even when it improves diversity.

Using race as a factor in student assignment has never been popular in the United States, even after the landmark Brown decision in 1954. The efforts of the Seattle and Louisville schools to achieve student diversity by using race as a factor in student admission decisions were designed to permit minority students to attend schools outside their racially segregated neighborhoods, thereby admitting them to schools in majority-white neighborhoods where they would improve the diversity of the student body.



As superintendent of Richmond Public Schools, I witnessed “white flight” from the city’s public schools, as parents and government agencies stood up against public school desegregation. Richmond operated a voluntary desegregation plan for several years before being ordered by the U.S. District Court to desegregate the entire system using crosstown busing (*Bradley v. School Board of Richmond* 1971).

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Table 1 indicates the decline in the number of white students in the Richmond Public Schools that was associated with the phenomenon of “white flight” for 1970–1972. The decline of white students was even more dramatic in the following year, when they were only 17% of the enrolled students, compared with 37% for the year before. Correspondingly, the enrollment of black students rose from 63% to 83% (Pratt 1992).

These data might suggest that school desegregation in Richmond made the system less racially diverse for its students. On the contrary, if you consider the diversity in the schools before desegregation, there was de jure or legal racial segregation in this system, as was the case in most of the South. School desegregation brought more racial diversity to public school students.

Part of the decline of white students in the public schools can be attributed to differences in the birth rates of whites and blacks in this community (Hunter 2004). More black students than whites were born during the years preceding this period, which had a cumulative effect on student enrollment and the racial diversity of schools. This conclusion is supported by research and estimates of the U.S. census data from 1972 to 1992, which indicate that the number of black students enrolled in public school increased by 3%; Latino student enrollment experienced a huge increase of 89%; and white student enrollment decreased by 14%.

Also, data indicate that in 1992, 89% of whites, 95% of blacks, and 92% of Latinos attended public schools in the United States (Orfield and others 1993). Because of these factors, the percentage of white students in the public schools declined each year in Richmond and elsewhere.

Prospects for the Future

Recent decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court have rejected the use of race-conscious policies to remedy past racial discrimination, including the *Milliken v. Bradley* school desegregation case, the 1978 affirmative action decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, and the Court’s recent decision in the Seattle and Louisville school desegregation cases. In the latter, the Court held that race-based student admission decisions could not be made unless there was clear evidence of state-imposed segregation. With these factors in mind, how can school districts further diversify student assignments?

Justice Kennedy presented some options for school districts to achieve student racial integration in his swing opinion in the Seattle and Louisville cases:

- Locate schools between racially distinct neighborhoods
- Redraw school attendance zones
- Target recruitment of students from particular schools

However, social science research and the experiences of many school districts do not indicate that such measures will be successful without using race-conscious student assignment plans. Using race-conscious criteria for student assignment has created more diversity in public schools, as supported by the recent experience of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina, which shifted from a comprehensive race-based system of student assignment to a race-neutral one. This change in Charlotte resulted in increased student racial segregation and less diversity.

Wake County schools in North Carolina, a system of more than 100,000 students, assigns students based on socioeconomic status. The U.S. Department of Education has recognized this school system and four others for their success in maintaining a racially diverse school district by using race-neutral student assignment procedures. Not all the districts that use this method of student assignment have been equally successful.

Table 1. Enrollment and Racial Composition of the Richmond Public Schools 1970–1972

School Year	Total Enrollment	Black Students	Percentage of Total	White Students	Percentage of Total
1970–1971	50,114	28,975	57.82	21,139	42.18
1971–1972	44,439	28,010	63.03	16,429	36.97

In light of the Seattle and Louisville decisions, school districts can use other approaches to student assignment to maintain or create diversity in student bodies (Wells and Frankenberg 2007):

- Managed choice approaches, such as magnet schools that are based on themes and use nonracial criteria for student assignment
- Criteria that coincide with race, such as using neighborhoods or native languages to assign students to schools

Conclusion

According to evidence, segregation is harmful to children’s education. This knowledge continues to suggest that there is a sense of urgency to create learning institutions for public school students with racially and ethnically diverse student bodies. This suggestion is supported by knowledge supplied by Wells and Frankenberg (2007) that indicates that the majority of the nation’s citizens now favor children of different races and cultures attending public schools together. Therefore, school districts should continue to develop ways to ensure that students can study in diverse settings.

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ASBO MEMBER TESTIFIES BEFORE SUBCOMMITTEE

Mary Lagnado, assistant superintendent for business management services for the Westbury Unified School District in Old Westbury, New York, was invited by Congresswoman Carolyn, McCarthy (NY) to testify before the Healthy Families and Communities Subcommittee in October. Lagnado, a 2007 Eagle Award recipient, shared with the Congressional subcommittee the details of her district’s Breakfast on the Go program. The program provides breakfast for every student in the district, PreK-12. That’s about 4,200 breakfasts every day.

Lagnado reported that district data shows an improvement in English/Language Arts and math scores for English Language Learners on the New York State Assessments. As well, the secondary school teachers see an improvement in the attendance rates in the afternoon classes and in the lass participation of students in these classes.

“This program is very successful and confirms our goal to provide accessibility to all students,” Lagnado said. “Students are encouraged to arrive to school early to eat a healthy breakfast prior to the start of the instructional program so that they can be ‘fit’ for learning.”

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