

## **School Integration and K-12 Educational Outcomes: A Synthesis of Social Science Evidence**

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### **Question 1: How do K-12 school diversity initiatives support school reform and contribute to increasing student academic achievement?**

Teachers, curricula, and pedagogy are essential components of opportunities to learn, but they are not the only important ones. The social organization of schools and classrooms also contributes to the quality of educational experiences. Whether a school is racially and socioeconomically (SES) diverse or segregated makes a critical difference for K-12 achievement across the curriculum: Students who attend racially and socioeconomically diverse schools are more likely to achieve higher tests scores and better grades, to graduate from high school, and to attend and graduate from college compared with their otherwise comparable counterparts who attend schools with high concentrations of low-income and/or disadvantaged minority youth.

Since 2005 I have surveyed and synthesized the social, educational, and behavioral science research on this topic.<sup>2</sup> I found the preponderance of high quality social science research published since the late 1980s is clear and consistent regarding the effects of school racial and SES composition on K-12 educational outcomes. Attending a diverse school promotes achievement in mathematics, science, language and reading. Achievement benefits accrue to students in all grades, but most markedly those in middle and high schools. Students from all racial and SES backgrounds can benefit from diverse schools—including middle-class whites—although low-income disadvantaged youth benefit the most from attending diverse schools. One exception may be Asian and Latino immigrant students who appear to benefit from attending school with their coethnics, most likely because of language issues. Importantly, there is no evidence that integrated schooling harms any student group.

Moreover, diverse K-12 schools foster other positive outcomes that are integral links in the adult life-course trajectory. In addition to achievement, the positive short-term outcomes of K-12 schooling include a reduction in prejudice and fears; increases in cross-racial trust and friendships; enhanced capacity for multicultural navigation. These benefits foster highly desirable long-term outcomes for adults such as greater educational and occupational attainment; workplace readiness for the global economy; adult cross-racial friendships; choice of integrated neighborhoods; democratic values and attitudes; the avoidance of the criminal justice system; and integrated schools build civic capacity in communities. These long-term outcomes are, in turn, essential building blocks of social cohesion, a quality increasingly vital to a vigorous multiethnic, democratic society.

### **Question 2: What are the obstacles and challenges, including legal, that K-12 school districts face in initiating and implementing diversity plans? What strategies can school districts use to ensure public support of diversity initiatives?**

I defer to Mr. Payton and others with appropriate expertise to speak about the legal obstacles school districts face in initiating and implementing diversity plans. However, from a policy and practical perspective, several obstacles make a school district's voluntary pursuit of diversity more difficult than it needs to be. First, educators and policy-makers often are hamstrung by a widespread public misperception that all public schools are failing. Public conversations about education too often overlook the fact that the vast majority of schools in most school districts are successful and

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<sup>2</sup> The results of the literature survey are archived in a searchable database available at: <http://sociology.uncc.edu/people/rmickelson/spivackFrameset.html>. This presentation is based on research supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, the American Sociological Association, and the Poverty and Race Research Action Council.

many are exemplary. The public narrative needs to distinguish between the districts and schools that are in crisis and the thousands and thousands of successful public schools. Second, districts that desire to create diverse schools frequently do not have resources to do so. Resource deficits range from insufficient transportation funds to inadequate technical expertise. Third, educational decision-makers at all levels too often misuse or ignore research if empirical data do not support their favorite policies. Scientific evidence must inform policies. Fourth, efforts to make segregated schools “work” through reforms aimed at improving outcomes in high poverty disadvantaged minority schools are rarely successful and almost never sustainable beyond the first year. Each failure reinforces negative perceptions of the students who attend segregated schools. This dynamic makes it difficult to convince skeptical parents that their own children will thrive in integrated middle class public schools if “those children from the housing projects and the trailer parks” are also enrolled.

One key way for local districts to build public support for diverse schools is to change the dominant narrative about integrated public education. Leadership is necessary to convey the message that racially and socioeconomically diverse schools are desirable middle-class schools; they are a cost effective and fiscally prudent reform. Local school leaders can draw examples from the corporate world and the military where diversity is considered essential for success and efficiency. Moreover, they can illustrate their claims by pointing to the US military’s schools that serve the children of members of the armed services. Schools for military children are integrated by race and SES, high performing, and do not produce the race and SES gaps found in public or private civilian schools.

### **Question 3: What can the Administration do to support school district efforts to implement and increase school diversity efforts?**

Given the constraints of federalism, the Administration can support school district efforts to increase diversity by exercising leadership to change the dominant narrative about public education in general and integrated schooling specifically. They also can use carrots and sticks to shape state and local education policies and reform strategies.

1. Spread the word: Desegregation was an educational success! The research record clearly demonstrates the benefits of racially and socioeconomically diverse schools. Trends in racial achievement gaps narrowed steadily during the years when the nation’s schools were desegregating at a steady pace. The narrowing trends have decreased markedly since desegregation faltered in the late 1980s. Publicize this evidence and honor local examples of successful integrated schools.
2. Coordinate housing policies with education policy to foster greater residential and educational diversity. Given the demographic homogeneity of many of our communities and the neighborhood school basis of most pupil assignment plans, housing policy is *de facto* education policy. Attempting to create education policy for diversity without developing housing policies for diversity is akin to cleaning the air on one side of a screen door.<sup>3</sup>
3. Incentivize the creation of diverse schools. Federal programs can prioritize reforms that foster academic, racial, and economic diversity. Diversity goals should be part of the reauthorization of ESEA and any future Race to the Top initiatives—perhaps even a “Race to Diversity” initiative could be instituted. Provide technical assistance to LEAs that seek to create and implement diverse schools. Allow flexibility and provide support for transportation costs linked to diversity initiatives.
4. Discourage programs or policies that foster resegregation by SES, race, or ability. Require diversity impact statements for all school reforms that involve federal programs. Private schools should not be permitted to convert to charters if they are not diverse. Charters, magnets, EMOs, and voucher programs should not be permitted to exclude special needs children or English language-learners.

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<sup>3</sup> Here I adapt Jean Anyon’s metaphor about school reform to the synergistic nature of housing and education policies.