

THE BENEFITS OF RACIAL AND ECONOMIC INTEGRATION IN OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM: WHY THIS MATTERS FOR OUR DEMOCRACY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2007, in *Parents Involved*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that school districts could not classify students solely on the basis of race when voluntarily pursuing integration. Since then, many school districts have been scrambling to replace their race-based assignment plans with race-neutral ones. To some this signals the end of *Brown* and the abandonment of racially integrated schools. Yet, a majority of the Justices agreed that the state has a compelling interest in both promoting diversity and avoiding racial isolation in our public schools. Given the increasingly deep and pervasive race and class-based segregation in our nation, what can be done to end this isolation and increase opportunities in our schools and in our communities?

The remedies and educational initiatives we have enacted thus far have only demonstrated modest amounts of success in part because they are failing to disrupt the cycle of racialized poverty that is creating and reinforcing pervasive educational inequities. In this report, we demonstrate the benefits of an approach that proactively pursues racial and economic integration in our schools. Setting integration both as a goal and as a solution, requires targeting policies and practices embedded in educational opportunity structures such as school locations, student assignment plans, and the quality and diversity of instructors.



Our first task is to review the negative effects of both socioeconomic and racial segregation.¹ Research consistently shows that living in concentrated poverty decreases life opportunities. It limits educational attainment, constrains future earning potential, and negatively impacts health and safety. This can trap individuals, families, and entire communities in an inescapable, generational cycle of poverty. Schools' socioeconomic makeup has an even greater impact on student performance than does that student family's socioeconomic or racial status. In other words, the race and socioeconomic status (SES) of the school matter more than the race and SES of the student.

Some assert that SES can or must be used as a proxy for race, but many school districts that have adopted this approach have seen their schools become increasingly segregated and their student achievement levels drop. We caution against such a binary approach; research demonstrates that there are unique advantages to both racial and economic integration. Thus student assignment plans must be deliberately created to serve all students of varying racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. This process is complex. Plans must be customized for each district taking into account local particularities and factors such as: race, place, class, socioeconomic status, academic performance, and language barriers.

Our second task is to show the positive effects of economically and racially integrated schools. Research has consistently demonstrated that these schools prepare all students, not just the impoverished students of color, to be effective citizens in our pluralistic society, enhance social cohesion, and reinforce democratic values. Students in integrated schools benefit from a higher level of parental involvement, graduate at higher rates, complete more years of education, earn higher degrees and major in more varied disciplines, gain greater access to professional jobs, and earn higher incomes, even when controlling for a number of other background characteristics. A growing number of studies also show that institutions such as schools, when properly integrated, help stabilize diverse communities.

It is important to note at the outset that simple desegregation efforts often fail to achieve “true” integration, resulting in assimilation, segregation within schools, ability grouping and tracking. Conversely, meaningful integration transforms the educational setting, fostering open relationships and the exchange of ideas among students of all races, ethnicities, and classes. Through policy, space, curriculum, trained instructors, supportive administrators, counselors and other student advocates, integrated schools and neighborhoods contribute to the construction of an equitable, multi-racial democracy.

Policy Recommendations:

- In order to promote high achievement for all, fulfill our democratic responsibility, and provide students with the cultural fluency necessary to participate in our pluralistic society, we must make a long-term commitment to end racial and socioeconomic isolation in our schools. This has implications for both student assignment plans and in-school educational practices such as tracking or ability grouping.
- Although many districts are reaching for overly simplistic remedies that can be seamlessly crafted in light of *Parents Involved*, each school district must take geographic and demographic particularities into account when crafting a custom integration plan. Research supports the utilization of a multi-factor approach that deliberately seeks to uphold racial integration, including such factors as location of neighborhoods of spatially concentrated poverty and neighborhoods of low educational opportunity, family SES, and student academic achievement levels.
- Although the *Parents Involved* decision limits the means districts have available to achieve racial integration, it lays promising legal groundwork for addressing racial isolation across and within opportunity structures, including housing, public health, economic development and transportation. Research supports the need to work within and across each domain to achieve equity in education, closing the achievement gap and raising the performance level of all students.
- Parents, community organizations, researchers, and others must collectively advocate for integrated education. Policy makers must ensure integration policies and practices are implemented and aligned in the ways necessary to fully harness the benefits of diversity, and to achieve high quality, comprehensive, and effective education.

- In pursuing any educational change, we must be careful not to undermine the very purpose of the public system of education- to give our students the knowledge, and skills necessary to become full members of our democratic society, and to strengthen and legitimize our democracy.

¹ In collecting studies and their data for this report, we rely heavily on the Brief of 553 Social Scientists as *Amici Curiae* in Support of Respondents, Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1., 127 S.Ct. 2738, 2007, and the meta-analysis of research conducted by Professor Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.