

REALITIES THAT UNDERMINE OUR IDEALS

By Iris C. Rotberg

“One foot cannot stand on two boats.” — Chinese proverb

ABSTRACT

School leaders juggle the often inconsistent goals of maintaining support of middle- and upper-income families for public education and, at the same time, implementing policies to strengthen equity for low-income students. The article describes how these tradeoffs play out in different communities, the role of concentrated poverty and segregation, and potential options for making equity gains while maintaining widespread support for public education.

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CONFLICTING GOALS

Under apartheid in South Africa, schools that served White students were funded at 10 times the level of schools that served Black students. When apartheid ended and funding was equalized, schools in affluent communities, now multiracial, had significant funding reductions. Government officials were left with two choices: either ensure resource equality, which would risk the loss of affluent families to private schools, or permit private contributions to public schools to compensate for reduced funding after equalization. The latter was chosen as the lesser of two evils. (1)

School leaders in the United States face similar choices. They know that maintaining broad support for public education depends on the continued participation of middle- and high-income families. If these families leave the public education system, public schools will be perceived as second-rate options, and any hope of educational equity will be over.

The dilemma is that policies designed to encourage middle- and high-income families to stay in public schools are often inconsistent with policies to strengthen equity, defined here as the opportunity for students to attend schools and

education programs that are integrated by income, race, and ethnicity. We might look away when affluent schools receive additional funding from their families. However, we cannot look away when the inequity is so severe that it limits opportunities for millions of low-income children.

The problem begins with high concentrations of community and school poverty. (2) More than 12 million students attend schools with poverty levels above 75 percent. (3) While teachers in high-poverty schools can make an important difference in the lives of individual students, and many students beat the odds, neither the teachers nor the students can overcome the correlation between high concentrations of poverty and low average test scores. (4) And despite the fact that test scores are largely a reflection of family income, not school quality, it is test scores that are used to assess whether schools are succeeding or failing.

Fair or not, families that have alternatives do not choose schools with high concentrations of poverty. In many developing countries with high overall levels of poverty, middle- and high-income families have long chosen private education. Industrialized countries, however, more often maintain broad support for public education. In the United States, 90 percent of elementary and secondary students are enrolled in public schools. (5) The long-term support of more affluent families, however, is precarious, and education policies are designed to encourage these families to continue sending their children to public schools.

The bottom line is that districts generally low-key desegregation plans and support selective schools and tracks—gifted, honors, advanced placement, and baccalaureate—which divide students and result in classes with limited diversity, even if housed in diverse schools.

The competition for admission to selective schools and tracks takes place on an uneven playing field, beginning with tutoring and cram courses that are primarily available to the more affluent families.

The selective schools and tracks, therefore, disproportionately benefit middle- and high-income students, and provide an incentive for these families to remain in public schools—but at a cost to high-poverty students, who are further isolated in separate schools and tracks.

POTENTIAL FOR REDUCING CONCENTRATED POVERTY

Many urban districts face poverty rates so severe that it is not possible to make major reductions in the number of schools with high concentrations of poverty. (6) Affluent students of all racial and ethnic groups who stay in urban public schools often attend selective schools. Some of these schools, like the School Without Walls High School (7) in Washington, D.C., are racially and ethnically diverse; others, like Stuyvesant High School (8) in New York City, have only minimal representation of Black and Hispanic students. Either way, the selective schools have lower poverty rates than the schools attended by the majority of students in the district. (9)

Suburban districts can offer more opportunities for integration because they typically have heterogenous student populations and lower overall poverty rates. Many of these districts, therefore, could theoretically design school attendance zones to minimize concentrated poverty but face controversy and threats to leave public schools if the changes in school attendance zones require middle- and upper-income families to leave their community schools and transfer to higher-poverty schools. (10)

Integration and segregation patterns in these districts, however, also suggest that families do support integrated schools as long as the schools are in their communities and poverty levels remain moderate.

So it is not unusual for diverse districts to have a three-tier system: segregated schools with high concentrations of poverty in some neighborhoods, integrated schools with lower poverty rates in other neighborhoods, and schools with little diversity in the wealthiest neighborhoods because of the high cost of homes.

Consider, for example, Montgomery County, Maryland, a large, diverse district, with many integrated schools and long-standing affordable housing programs. Even in this context, however, 20 percent of the schools have Black and Hispanic student enrollments of 80 percent or more, although the combined enrollment of Black and Hispanic students in the district is only 52 percent. These segregated schools also have among the highest poverty rates in the district, well above the overall district poverty rate of 34 percent. Schools in neighborhoods with lower poverty rates are more integrated by race and ethnicity. (11)

The differential opportunities in high-poverty and more affluent neighborhoods do not go unnoticed. Students and families in the high-poverty neighborhoods have protested their segregated schools and, in response, Montgomery County is considering changes in school attendance zones to increase integration. (12) To date, the ensuing controversy has ensured that any changes would be minimal.

The burden of concentrated community and school poverty falls largely on Black and Hispanic families in both urban and suburban districts.

Despite the enormous gains that have been made in the decades since the Civil Rights movement, large wealth gaps continue to limit the housing and, therefore, the school options of even relatively high-income Black and Hispanic families. The median White family has more than eight times the wealth of the median Black family and almost five times the wealth of the median Hispanic family (13)—the result of discrimination, poverty, and, particularly in the case of Black families, a history of segregated federal housing programs and denial of mortgages in “redlined” neighborhoods. As a result, Black families lost the opportunity to accumulate wealth and choose more expensive neighborhoods as housing prices rose. (14) 45 percent of Black students and 43 percent of Hispanic students attend high-poverty schools compared to 14 percent of Asian- American students and 8 percent of White students. (15)

Minority and immigrant families in other industrialized countries also face discrimination, concentrations of poverty, segregation, tracked programs, and separate schools. (16) The extent and nature of the problems differ among countries, as do the government policies, but research conducted by the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality shows considerably less segregation in most European cities that had recent increases in immigration than in new U.S. “gateway” cities. The authors attribute this difference, at least in part, to concerted government efforts in Europe to strengthen integration through “social” (non-profit) and mixed-income housing rather than relying largely on market-based options as in the United States. (17)

WHAT NEXT?

As long as poverty remains high, school leaders will continue to juggle their concerns about equity with their desire to maintain enrollment of middle- and high-income students in public schools.

There is no lack of interest in reducing concentrations of poverty and increasing integration, but current efforts remain marginal. While desegregation initiatives might make limited changes in school attendance zones that affect a small number of students, high-poverty schools stay segregated. Advanced tracks open to more students, and some selective schools, like Thomas Jefferson High School (18) for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Virginia, revise their admissions process to be more inclusive. But tracks and selective schools continue to advantage the more affluent students.

Certainly, even the small changes make a difference. But we can expect the major educational inequities to persist so long as current levels of concentrated poverty persist. School leaders will continue to have one foot on two boats and families who have alternatives will continue to avoid schools with high concentrations of poverty as they have done time and time again in the United States and in countries throughout the world. If we ignore these psychological realities, our rhetoric about equity will be just words.

There are no quick fixes. However, we do have options. We know that families will support integrated schools if the schools are in their communities and poverty levels remain moderate. Therefore, if we want to give students the opportunity to attend integrated schools and education programs, we will need to go to the source of the problem and reduce concentrations of poverty. That can only be done by political decisions about social and economic policies—poverty reduction, employment, affordable housing, and access to higher education. Only then can we expect significant gains in educational equity.

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