Teachers College Record
The Voice of Scholarship in Education

# School Integration and Segregation: How We Got Where We Are

by Iris C. Rotberg - December 01, 2020

*An opinion piece about school integration might seem out of touch with reality at a time when many students are separated, each in their own home or learning pod. I write, however, as a reminder that the pandemic will end and we will then need integrated schools more than ever. This commentary attempts to give a realistic assessment of alternative approaches for strengthening integration in different types of school districts. It describes first the educational and social policies that have led to current trends in integration and segregation. It then considers the challenges and tradeoffs faced by segregated, high poverty districts and by those that are more diverse and makes recommendations for achieving lasting school integration.*

## INTRODUCTION

Researchers may disagree about whether school segregation has increased or decreased, but virtually all conclude that our schools are far too segregated by race, ethnicity, and income. Yet the recommendations proposed to strengthen integration often read like a generic wish list, without a realistic assessment of their feasibility, the tradeoffs that need to be considered, or how they would play out in different contexts. The analysis that follows attempts to address this gap. It describes first how we got where we are - the barriers and opportunities that contributed to current trends - and then considers policies for strengthening integration in different types of school districts.

## BARRIERS

### *Structural Barriers in School Systems*

The boundaries between school districts, and between school attendance zones within districts, serve as the basic structural barriers to integration. These barriers result to a great extent from public policies that were designed to maintain or increase segregation or that contributed to segregation indirectly. Together, the barriers have created a daunting set of obstacles.

The school district boundaries have been largely intractable since the Supreme Court decided in the *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) case that the district court's requirement for cross-district busing to achieve integration was not permissible. The problem is compounded by the fact that some states have hundreds of districts, and additional districts continue to form as communities secede from their current districts and create new districts. The secessions, often by the richer and whiter communities, entrench existing levels of segregation, and the districts left behind must now operate with a lower tax base and insufficient diversity to enable integration, even with the best intentions (Taylor et al., 2019).

School attendance zones typically reflect the segregation of the neighborhoods and serve as a further barrier to integration. In some districts, these attendance zones are gerrymandered to reinforce the already high levels of school segregation (Richards, 2017).

We know from many years of experience that attendance zones are difficult to change for purposes of integration. Busing is rarely a politically viable option, regardless of the length of the bus ride. Indeed, complaints about busing are often smokescreens to obscure underlying concerns about desegregation plans, particularly when these plans involve attendance at schools with high concentrations of poverty. Because family poverty and concentrated school poverty are correlated with low test scores, families fear that their children's future opportunities and the value of their homes will decline.

District officials know that these families can find ways to avoid desegregation plans, and they do not want to lose them to private or charter schools, and they certainly do not want them to secede from the district and form a new district. When faced with these choices, therefore, the officials respond by making only minimal changes in attendance zones, or none at all (Mickelson et al., 2018). The fear is that if the families leave, even current levels of integration will diminish and the possibility for meaningful future integration will end with the families' departure.

*Economic Inequality and Housing Segregation*

The barriers to school integration go well beyond specific decisions about school districts and schools and reflect centuries of discriminatory policies that led to severe economic inequalities and, in turn, to concentrated poverty in neighborhoods and schools.

These economic inequalities were compounded by government policies designed specifically to segregate housing and by racially restrictive covenants. Black families, therefore, did not have the opportunity to benefit from the increases in property values that contributed to wealth creation for White families (Rothstein, 2017). Although the Fair Housing Act (1968) led to more open housing and integrated communities, it did not lead to legislation that would increase the opportunity for low- and middle-income families to accumulate sufficient wealth to purchase homes in these communities. It is not surprising, therefore, that middle-income Black families are more likely to live in low-income neighborhoods than are middle-income White families (Leonhardt, 2015), or that the median wealth of Black families is one-tenth the wealth of White families - and the wealth differential remains high even when the comparison is limited to high-income families (McIntosh et al., 2020).

The combined effects of discrimination, economic inequality, and segregation take many generations to overcome. They continue to pose the greatest barriers to school integration.

## OPPORTUNITIES

The list of barriers can seem overwhelming. But changes that occurred over the past several decades have also led to increased opportunities for integration.

As a result of changes in living patterns since the 1974 ***Milliken v. Bradley*** decision, suburbs have become much more diverse. In 1974, fewer than 20% of Blacks lived in suburbs. That number has now more than doubled, and the growth is even greater for Latinx and Asians (Massey & Tannen, 2018). As a result, both students of color and White students have more access to integrated schools.

And beyond suburbs, the country generally is becoming increasingly diverse, largely because of substantial increases in Latinx and Asian populations (Frey, 2020). The increased diversity, often in communities and schools that formerly had primarily White populations, is widespread throughout the country and offers new opportunities for integration.

The changes that occurred in the wake of the civil rights movement have also had a positive impact on integration, and their benefits have compounded over the generations. Far too many, however, have not been able to share in the gains, and family poverty and concentrated poverty in communities and schools continue to be largely unaddressed. It is here that segregation remains most entrenched.

## POLICIES

*Segregated, High-Poverty Districts*

The segregation in high-poverty districts can be traced directly to the barriers described earlier: district boundaries and school attendance zones designed to segregate, government and private policies that segregated housing, and centuries of poverty and discrimination. These high-poverty districts, whether in large cities or in other communities, have few options to reduce segregation. District-wide integration is not mathematically possible because the school population has so little diversity. The districts, therefore, can include only a relatively small number of integrated schools; typically, magnet or charter or regular public schools that are designed to be diverse, schools that offer special programs, and schools located in the more diverse neighborhoods. The rest of the districts' schools and students remain highly segregated.

Standing apart are the selective schools that require entrance exams. Some of these schools are integrated by race and ethnicity, while others are segregated, but in both cases, low-income students are generally underrepresented. Take, for example, School Without Walls, a selective academic high school in Washington, DC. Although the school is integrated racially and ethnically, it has dramatically less poverty than the district schools generally: 16% of its students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, as compared to 69% for the district as a whole (Public School Review, n.d.-a; D.C. Hunger Solutions, 2019). The Bronx High School of Science, in contrast, is highly segregated by race and ethnicity (only 3% Black and 6% Latinx students); 46% of the students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, a higher percentage than at School Without Walls, but still well below the 75% eligible in New York City Public Schools as a whole (Public School Review, n.d.-b; Piccoli & Harris, 2017). The Bronx High School of Science has become a highly controversial symbol of New

York's school segregation.

A small number of high-poverty districts have attempted to give their students more access to integrated schools through metropolitan-wide agreements that provide for voluntary busing of students across district lines (Brittain, Willis, & Cookson, 2019). While there are relatively few examples of these plans, they have provided at least some students with an opportunity to enroll in diverse schools. The "Strength in Diversity Act," recently passed by the House of Representatives, also includes voluntary cross-district busing as one of its options (Committee on Education and Labor, 2019).

A second House bill, the "Equity and Inclusion Enforcement Act," takes a different approach, which could also be applied to reduce segregation (Brufke, 2020). It includes a requirement intended to facilitate disparate impact lawsuits by amending Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to permit individual civil actions. Disparate impact is a potentially powerful tool that does not require proof of intent and could counter policies that have a disparate, and negative, impact on students of color; policies, for example, on district boundaries, school attendance zones, tracking, and entrance exams that directly affect school segregation.

*Diverse Districts*

Diverse districts face many of the problems faced by segregated, high-poverty districts: large gaps in income and wealth, neighborhoods separated by race, ethnicity, and poverty, and prohibitive housing costs. And, like the more segregated districts, diverse districts also track students in ways that contribute to segregation. But, in contrast to districts with limited opportunities to integrate, diverse districts have the potential for system-wide integration. That potential has increased as the number of diverse districts has increased.

The districts with longstanding diversity, many in suburbs of major metropolitan areas, often show patterns of integration and segregation that reflect both the positive and negative trends in the country as a whole. Montgomery County, Maryland, a large district in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, serves as a useful example. As the district has become increasingly diverse, the overall proportion of students attending racially and ethnically diverse schools has also increased. This increase, however, has not occurred for students in the highest poverty schools, which have become more segregated by race, ethnicity, and family income (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2003, 2018).

The increasing segregation in high-poverty schools has, of course, not gone unnoticed by the families whose children attend them, and parents and students have protested the lack of diversity in their schools (Reed, 2019). One obvious solution is to modify school attendance zones to include a broader mix of income levels and thereby reduce concentrations of poverty. But that is easier said than done. Potential changes in attendance zones are highly controversial and some families from the more affluent neighborhoods have threatened to leave the public school system if their children can no longer attend the low-poverty neighborhood schools (Peetz, 2019). Montgomery County, like many other diverse school districts, now faces difficult tradeoffs in deciding how best to integrate currently segregated schools while still maintaining the district's overall diversity and the integration it already has.

In contrast to schools with high concentrations of poverty, the schools with more moderate poverty rates generally reflect the demographics of the district and are well-integrated. However, schools with low poverty rates, while still showing some diversity, have lower percentages of Latinx and Black students than the district as a whole (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2003, 2018). The cost of homes is a major barrier to fully integrating these schools.

Like the country, Montgomery County has great wealth along with its considerable poverty, and that wealth is reflected in median home costs around $1 million in the neighborhoods with low-poverty schools (Realtor.com, n.d.). Montgomery County has attempted to mitigate the problem of home costs with a longstanding affordable housing program that requires real estate developers to sell or rent some of the homes they build at below-market prices (Davison, n.d.). These homes are currently located throughout the county and recent policies are intended to increase their supply in affluent neighborhoods, thereby making it possible for participating low- and moderate-income families to attend schools in a wider range of neighborhoods (Rodgers, 2018), a small but critical step in addressing the problem of segregation.

## ACHIEVING LASTING SCHOOL INTEGRATION

Although it often seems like an uphill battle, integration has been strengthened in many communities largely because the country is far more inclusive and diverse than it was when the civil rights movement first gained strength. The civil rights leaders knew well that racism would not end because we wished it to end but that laws and public policies were required to ensure civil rights protections and strengthen access to education, employment, and housing. It is these steps that have made, and can continue to make, the most difference in increasing school integration, both in districts that are now highly

segregated and in diverse districts attempting to maintain and strengthen the integration they currently have.

Like many other areas of public policy, the goal of achieving lasting school integration, as a political and practical matter, may be less in specific school practices, as important as these are, than in implementing policies that address the basic problems of poverty and provide opportunities for economic strength. In the long run, it is the choices we make about the underlying social and economic problems that will most determine the outcome of the debate on whether segregation is increasing or decreasing.

*References*


Brittain, J., Willis, L., & Cookson, P. W., Jr. (2019, February 28). *Sharing the wealth: How regional finance and desegregation plans can enhance educational equity*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/sharing-wealth-regional-finance-desegregation-plans-report

Brufke, J. (2020, September 16). House passes bill to allow private lawsuits against public schools for discriminatory practices. *The Hill*. https://thehill.com/homenews/house/516761-house-passes-bill-to-allow-private-lawsuits-against-public-schools-for

Committee on Education and Labor. (2019). *Fact sheet: Strength in Diversity Act of 2019*. Author. https://edlabor.house.gov/imo/media/doc/2019-05-16%20Strength%20in%20Diversty%20Act%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf

D.C. Hunger Solutions. (2019). *D.C. Public Schools school breakfast scorecard*. Washington, DC: Author. https://www.dchunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/SY1718-DCPS-school-breakfast-scorecard.pdf

Davison, E. B. (n.d.). *Major housing programs in Montgomery County MD* [PowerPoint presentation]. National Association of Realtors. https://www.nar.realtor/housopp.nsf/files/housing_programsmontgomery_county%20md-elizdav.ppt/$file/housing_programsmontgomery_county%20md-elizdav.ppt

Fair Housing Act of 1968. Sec. 800. [42 U.S.C. 3601]. https://www.justice.gov/crt/fair-housing-act-2

Frey, W. H. (2020, July 1). *The nation is diversifying even faster than predicted, according to new census data*. Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/research/new-census-data-shows-the-nation-is-diversifying-even-faster-than-predicted/ [switch 9 and 10?]

Leonhardt, D. (2015, June 24). Middle-class Black families, in low-income neighborhoods. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/upshot/middle-class-black-families-in-low-income-neighborhoods.html

Massey, D.S. & Tannen, J. (2018). Suburbanization and segregation in the United States: 1970-2010. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 41*(9), 1594-1611.

McIntosh, K., Moss, E., Nunn, R., & Shambaugh, J. (2020, February 27). Examining the Black-White wealth gap [Blog, Brookings Institution]. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/

Mickelson, R. A., Giersch, J., Nelson, A. H., & Bottia, M. C. (2018). Do charter schools undermine efforts to create racially and socioeconomically diverse public schools? In I. C. Rotberg & J. L. Glazer (Eds.), *Choosing charters: Better schools or more segregation?* (pp. 116-132). Teachers College Press.

Milliken v. Bradley 418 U.S. 717 (1974).

Montgomery County Public Schools. (2003). *2002-2003 schools at a glance*. Author.

Montgomery County Public Schools. (2018). *2017-2018 schools at a glance*. Author.

Peetz, C. (2019, November 15). County divided about districtwide school boundary analysis. *Bethesda Magazine*. https://bethesdamagazine.com/bethesda-beat/schools/county-divided-about-districtwide-school-boundary-analysis/

Piccoli, S., & Harris, E. A. (2017, September 6). New York City offers free lunch for all public school students. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/06/nyregion/free-lunch-new-york-city-schools.html

Public School Review. (n.d.-a). *School Without Walls High School*. Author. https://www.publicschoolreview.com/school-without-walls-high-school-profile

Public School Review. (n.d.-b). *Bronx High School of Science*. Author. https://www.publicschoolreview.com/bronx-high-school-of-science-profile

Realtor.com. (n.d.). *Potomac, MD real estate market*. Author. Retrieved from https://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-search/Potomac_MD/overview

Reed, D. (2019, April 24). Montgomery County is finally talking about its segregated schools. But can we fix them? *Greater Greater Washington*. https://ggwash.org/view/71803/montgomery-county-is-finally-talking-about-its-segregated-schools.-but-can-we-fix-them

Richards, M. P. (2017, November 13). Gerrymandering educational opportunity. *Phi Delta Kappan*. https://kappanonline.org/richards-gerrymandering-educational-opportunity/

Rodgers, B. (2018, July 30). County's affordable housing program is getting its first major update in more than a decade. *Bethesda Magazine*. https://bethesdamagazine.com/bethesda-beat/development/countys-affordable-housing-program-is-getting-its-first-major-update-in-more-than-a-decade/

Rothstein, R. (2017). *The color of law: A forgotten history of how our government segregated America*. Liveright.

Taylor, K., Frankenberg, E., & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2019). Racial segregation in the Southern schools, school districts, and counties where districts have seceded. *AERA Open, 5*(3), 1-16.