

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

Rescuing *Brown v. Board of Education*:
**Profiles of Twelve School Districts Pursuing Socioeconomic
School Integration**

A REPORT FROM THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

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Table of Contents

Introduction

I. [Why School Districts Pursue Socioeconomic School Integration](#)

II. Leading Districts Pursuing Socioeconomic School Integration

[Wake County \(Raleigh\), North Carolina](#)

[La Crosse, Wisconsin](#)

[Cambridge, Massachusetts](#)

III. Additional Districts Pursuing Socioeconomic School Integration

[Berkeley Unified School District, California](#)

[Brandywine Public School District, Delaware](#)

[Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public School District, North Carolina](#)

[Manatee County School District, Florida](#)

[McKinney Independent School District, Texas](#)

[Minneapolis, Minnesota](#)

[Omaha Public School District, Nebraska](#)

[Rochester City School District, New York](#)

[San Francisco Unified School District, California](#)

IV. [Future Prospects](#)

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to curtail significantly the ability of school districts to integrate by race has shifted attention to a new and growing alternative form of integration based on the socioeconomic status of students. Although the Court struck down plans in Louisville and Seattle, which used race as a factor in student assignment, it is clear that using a race-neutral alternative—such as family income—is perfectly legal.

The Court’s rulings invalidated Seattle and Louisville’s integration plans because, in the words of Justice Anthony Kennedy, “the schools could have achieved their stated ends through different means.” Before categorizing individuals by race, other methods must first be explored, he said.¹ Although Kennedy outlined a number of race-conscious alternatives that would be permissible, including “strategic site selection of new schools,” and “drawing attendance zones with general recognition of the demographics of the neighborhood,” Justice Stephen Breyer, in his dissent, noted that those alternatives were unlikely to be effective.²

By contrast, socioeconomic school integration offers two major attractions. Because of the overlap between race and economic status in the United States, socioeconomic integration plans can indirectly provide a significant measure of racial diversity in schooling without running afoul of the Constitution. Moreover, socioeconomic integration can help districts raise student achievement in order to meet the standards of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. A large body of research has long shown that concentrations of poverty—even more than concentrations of minority students—can impede academic achievement, and that providing all students with the chance to attend mixed-income schools can raise overall levels of achievement. Breaking up concentrations of poverty is not, as one judge suggested, a “clumsier proxy device”³ for obtaining a certain racial result; it is a powerful educational strategy for raising student achievement.

The Supreme Court’s decision to curtail the use of race was unfortunate because there is no more efficient way to produce the important goal of racially integrated schools than using race per se.⁴ It would be an enormous shame, however, if the many districts now using race in student assignment took the U.S. Supreme Court decisions invalidating voluntary race-conscious plans in Louisville and Seattle to conclude that they should give up on school integration altogether. Separate but equal has never worked well as an educational strategy, and it is important to recognize that a viable race-neutral alternative exists, one that has already been put into practice in many districts across the country.

Over the past fifteen years, and in particular since 2000, a growing number of districts have begun using a student’s family income as a factor deciding where students should attend school. Today, roughly forty districts, educating 2.5 million students, in “red” states and “blue” states across the country, are known to look at family income as a way to assign students. These districts include Baltimore County School District, Maryland;⁵ Boulder Valley School District, Colorado;⁶ Charles County School District, Maryland;⁷ Christina School District, Delaware;⁸ Clark County (Las Vegas), Nevada;⁹ Coweta County, Georgia;¹⁰ Duval County (Jacksonville) Public School District, Florida;¹¹

Eugene Public School District, Oregon;¹² Fresno Unified School District, Florida;¹³ Greenville County Public School District, South Carolina;¹⁴ Guilford County Public School District, North Carolina;¹⁵ Hamilton County Public School District (Chattanooga), Tennessee;¹⁶ Manchester School District, Connecticut;¹⁷ Miami-Dade County School District, Florida;¹⁸ Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland;¹⁹ Moorpark United School District, California;²⁰ New York City Public Schools: Community School Districts 13, 14, 15, 20 and 21, New York;²¹ Palm Beach County School District, Florida;²² Portland Public School District, Oregon;²³ Proviso Township High Schools, Illinois;²⁴ Rock Hill Public School District of York County, South Carolina;²⁵ San Jose Unified School District, California;²⁶ Seminole County Public Schools, Florida;²⁷ South Orange-Maplewood Public School District, New Jersey;²⁸ Springdale Public School District, Arkansas;²⁹ St. Lucie County Public School District, Florida;³⁰ and Williamsburg-James County School District, Virginia.³¹

This paper provides profiles of twelve districts. Three districts are described in depth: [Wake County \(Raleigh\), North Carolina](#); [La Crosse, Wisconsin](#); and [Cambridge, Massachusetts](#). In addition, the paper outlines plans in [Berkeley, California](#); [Brandywine, Delaware](#); [Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina](#); [Manatee County, Florida](#); [McKinney, Texas](#); [Minneapolis, Minnesota](#); [Omaha, Nebraska](#); [Rochester, New York](#); and [San Francisco, California](#). The paper also includes a few broad lessons about what features contribute to the success of programs.

The first district known to integrate by socioeconomic status was La Crosse, Wisconsin, which redrew high school district lines in the late 1970s and elementary school lines in the early 1990s to balance better the proportion of students receiving federally subsidized school lunch, a common indicator of low-income status. In more recent years, a number of additional districts have begun using economic status as a factor in assigning students. In Wake County (Raleigh), North Carolina, for example, the district adopted a policy goal in 2000 that no school should have more than 40 percent of students receiving free or reduced price lunch or have more than 25 percent of students achieving below grade level. Wake County's economic integration plan has had considerable success in both producing racial integration and raising academic achievement. ([See Wake County profile.](#))

As the following profiles suggest, however, socioeconomic integration plans vary dramatically in detail, and certain programs appear to be far more successful than others. Two major lessons emerge from this new movement.

First, system-wide goals are more effective in producing achievement results and racial integration than more modest goals. While Wake County has had success with its district-wide 40 percent cap on low-income students, some districts with more passive programs have been far less successful. For example, nearby Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, uses socioeconomic status as a factor in approving and disapproving student transfers. But because there is no overall goal of achieving a rough economic parity in the schools, or mechanisms in place to achieve that, the schools are resegregating by both class and race.³²

Second, using public school choice and magnet schools tends to be more politically acceptable than redrawing school boundaries to achieve socioeconomic integration. School districts have learned a great deal about how to integrate students voluntarily with different backgrounds since the crisis over implementing court-ordered busing in the 1970s. Today, most successful districts rely primarily on student assignment systems that utilize magnet schools and public school choice, rather than mandatory assignment and compulsory busing, to achieve the goal of socioeconomic integration. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, for example, all schools have been designated magnet schools. Under a system known as “controlled choice,” parents rank their preferences among schools, and the district honors choices in a way to ensure that all schools are within a given percentage-point range of the system’s average eligibility for free and reduced price lunch. The biggest public backlash against integration tends to come from compulsory redistricting, which offers parents no say in the matter of where their children attend school and offers little incentive for middle-class families to support integration. In places such as Manatee, Florida, for example, there was huge political fallout when some students were redistricted from high-performing schools, designated as “A” schools in Florida’s parlance, to “F” schools in order to achieve greater economic balance. Manatee’s subsequent plan to use economic status as a factor in its public school choice program, by contrast, generated little opposition. ([See Manatee profile.](#))

In many of the communities that attempt to pursue socioeconomic integration, the politics have been heated. The program requires heavy political lifting and genuine leadership. But many parents, educators, and business and religious leaders know intuitively what the research has told us: separate schools for rich and poor are inherently unequal. School board members that have the fortitude to tackle this problem likely will face opposition from some middle-class parents who believe that with their home selection, they have “purchased” the right to send their children to economically homogeneous neighborhood public schools. The best thing going for socioeconomic integration politically is that it works educationally, raising the academic achievement of low-income students while maintaining high levels of achievement for middle-class children.

This report begins with background on why school districts pursue socioeconomic integration. The second section highlights three leading districts with the longest-standing and most comprehensive socioeconomic integration policies: Wake County, La Crosse, and Cambridge. The third section provides shorter profiles of nine additional communities that are using socioeconomic status as a factor in assignment. A fourth section looks ahead at additional school districts that may move toward socioeconomic integration, including districts already discussing that possibility (such as Burlington, Vermont, and Pasadena, California) as well as districts now employing race as a criterion that may shift toward socioeconomic status (such as Louisville; Seattle; Lynn, Massachusetts; and others).

It is clear from the profiles that follow that socioeconomic school integration, when well implemented, can significantly boost academic achievement and also provide for students a racially integrated schooling environment that can contribute to greater social cohesion. Socioeconomic integration does not by itself eliminate the achievement gap between income groups, much of which

is rooted in inequalities in home environment. But it does eliminate the “double jeopardy” that low-income students face in high-poverty schools, and that change, by itself, is very significant.

I. WHY SCHOOL DISTRICTS PURSUE SOCIOECONOMIC SCHOOL INTEGRATION

Public schools have always had the twin goals of training informed citizens and productive workers, of promoting social cohesion and social mobility. Both sets of goals are severely undercut by growing segregation of schools—by economic status and by race—so in recent years, some forty school districts have begun to pursue conscious strategies to integrate students by economic status.

TRAINING PRODUCTIVE WORKERS AND PROMOTING SOCIAL MOBILITY

The first major reason school districts are pursuing socioeconomic integration is that these districts—under pressure from the No Child Left Behind Act to raise student achievement—are acting on forty years of research that shows that the single most important predictor of academic achievement is the socioeconomic status of the family a child comes from, and the second most important predictor is the socioeconomic makeup of the school she attends.³³ All students—rich, poor, white, black, Latino, and Asian—perform significantly better in schools with strong middle-class populations than they do in high poverty schools. Virtually everything that educators talk about as desirable in a school—high standards and expectations, good teachers, active parents, a safe and orderly environment, a stable student and teacher population—are more likely to be found in economically mixed schools than in high-poverty schools.

While it is possible to make schools with high concentrations of poverty work—we all know of such individual schools—it is extremely uncommon. A study by University of Wisconsin professor Douglas Harris, for example, found that middle-class schools (those with fewer than 50 percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch) are twenty-two times as likely to be consistently high performing as high-poverty schools (those with 50 percent or more of students eligible for subsidized lunch).³⁴

Middle-class schools perform better in part because middle-class students on average receive more support at home and come to school better prepared. But the vastly different educational environments typically found in middle-class and high-poverty schools also have a profound effect on achievement. On the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) given to fourth graders in math, for example, low-income students attending more-affluent schools scored substantially higher (239) than low-income students in high-poverty schools (219). This twenty-point difference is the equivalent of almost two years of learning. Indeed, low-income students given a chance to attend more-affluent schools performed more than half a year better, on average, than middle-income students who attend high-poverty schools (231).³⁵ At the high school level, similar results are found. In 2005, for example, University of California professor Russell Rumberger and his colleague Gregory J. Palardy found that a school’s socioeconomic status had as much impact on the achievement growth of high school students as a student’s individual economic status.³⁶

Research finds that socioeconomic school integration is a more powerful lever for raising academic achievement than racial integration per se. Racial desegregation raised black achievement in certain areas (such as Charlotte, North Carolina, where middle-class whites and low-income blacks were integrated) but not in others (such as Boston, in the mid-1970s, where low-income whites and low-income blacks were integrated). Research found that the academic benefits of racial desegregation came not from giving African American students a chance to sit next to whites, but from giving poor students of all races a chance to attend predominantly middle-class institutions.³⁷

Why does it matter to student achievement if a child attends a middle-class or high-poverty school? While money matters a great deal in education, people matter more. Consider the three main sets of actors in a school: students, parents, and faculty (teachers and principals). Research suggests that students learn a great deal from their peers, so it is an advantage to have classmates who are academically engaged and aspire to go on to college. Peers in middle-income schools are more likely to do homework and graduate, and less likely to watch television and cut class—all of which have been found to influence the behavior of classmates. Middle-class schools report half as many disorder problems as low-income schools, so more learning goes on. It is also an advantage to have high-achieving peers, whose knowledge is shared informally with classmates all day long. Middle-class peers come to schools with twice the vocabulary of low-income children, for example, so any given child is more likely to expand his vocabulary in a middle-class school through informal interaction.³⁸

Parents are also an important part of the school community, and research finds that it is an advantage to attend a school where parents are actively involved, volunteer in the classroom, and hold school officials accountable. Research repeatedly finds that middle-class parents are more likely to be involved in schools. Not having to work three jobs and having a car makes it easier to help out, so it is not surprising that, in middle-class schools, parents are four times as likely to be members of the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA).³⁹

Finally, research finds that the best teachers, on average, are attracted to middle-class schools. Teachers in middle-class schools are more likely to be licensed, to be teaching in their field of expertise, to have high teacher test scores, to have greater teaching experience, and to have more formal education. Teachers generally consider it a promotion to move from high-poverty to middle-class schools, and many of the best teachers transfer into middle-class schools at the first opportunity. Moreover, teachers in middle-class schools are more likely to have high expectations. Research has found that the grade of *C* in a middle-class school is the same as a grade of *A* in a high-poverty school, as measured by standardized tests results. Middle-class schools are also more likely to offer Advanced Placement classes and high-level math.⁴⁰

Are middle-class children hurt by attending economically mixed schools? The research suggests that sprinkling a few middle-class children into a school of highly concentrated poverty may hurt their academic achievement, but so long as a critical mass of the students are middle class (not eligible for free and reduced price lunch), middle-class student achievement does not decline with the presence of some low-income students. Studies find that integration is not a zero-sum game, in

which gains for low-income students are offset by declines in middle-class achievement. This is true in part because the majority is what sets the tone in a school, and because research finds that middle-class children are less affected by school influences (for good or ill) than low-income children.⁴¹

Of course, in some jurisdictions (about 14 percent nationally), it will be impossible to get to the goal of 50 percent or more middle-class student populations in every school because the entire district student population is majority low-income.⁴² But nationally, almost two-thirds of students are middle class, and creative efforts to integrate schools across existing school district lines can be pursued. Today, an estimated 500,000 students cross school district lines each day through interdistrict public school choice programs.⁴³

TRAINING TOLERANT CITIZENS AND PROMOTING SOCIAL COHESION

he second major reason school districts are pursuing socioeconomic school integration is that it can often produce a fair amount of racial integration, which has important societal benefits, apart from the question of achievement. In a diverse nation, made up of peoples from around the world, the public schools in the United States have a special role to help unify the country and teach students what it means to be an American. Common schools—schools common to students of all backgrounds—provide the glue necessary to hold the country together. Numerous studies have found that racial integration in public schools is important to fostering tolerant adults and good citizens.⁴⁴ As Justice Thurgood Marshall noted in one desegregation case, “unless our children begin to learn together, then there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together.”⁴⁵

Of course, there is no better way to achieve racial integration than using race itself, but the Supreme Court has now limited that option. Under the U.S. Supreme Court’s reading of the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause, any use of race—even for the benign purpose of promoting voluntary integration—is subject to “strict scrutiny.” This is a very exacting standard of review, which requires government to offer a “compelling” interest and ensure that the means employed are “narrowly tailored.”

By contrast, however, socioeconomic integration programs are on very sound legal footing. The government’s use of economic status need meet only the more relaxed “rational basis” test.⁴⁶ Even opponents of using race in student assignment—such as the Bush Administration and conservative organizations such as the Pacific Legal Foundation, the American Civil Rights Institute, and the Center for Equal Opportunity Center—concede that using socioeconomic status in student assignment is perfectly legal.⁴⁷ In fact, a legal challenge to Wake County’s socioeconomic integration program was rebuffed by the Bush Administration’s Education Department in 2003.⁴⁸

While employing race is the most efficient method of promoting racial integration, the evidence suggests that socioeconomic integration in many cases can produce a substantial racial dividend. For one thing, African American and other minority students are almost three times as likely to be low-income as white students. Among fourth grade students nationally in 2005, only 24 percent of whites but 70 percent of African Americans and 73 percent of Latinos were eligible for

free or reduced-price lunch.⁴⁹ Furthermore, within the universe of low-income students, poor blacks are more likely to live in concentrated poverty and attend high-poverty schools than poor whites. The Harvard Civil Rights Project, for example, found that in the 2003–2004 school year, only 15 percent of schools with 0–10 percent minority populations were high poverty, compared with 76 percent of schools with 90–100 percent minority populations.⁵⁰ Noting the strong link between racial segregation and poverty concentrations, important voices in the civil rights community have long argued that a significant benefit of desegregating by race is desegregation by socioeconomic status.⁵¹ By the same logic, a significant benefit of policies aimed at breaking up concentrations of poverty is a meaningful amount of integration by race.

According to a 2002 Century Foundation study conducted by Duncan Chaplin of the Urban Institute, integrating poor and nonpoor students results in 55.6 percent as much black/white integration as poor/nonpoor integration at the district level. If integration occurs at the metropolitan level, 79.9 percent as much black/white integration occurs as poor/nonpoor integration. Chaplin concludes, “To summarize, although economic integration is no guarantee of racial integration, it does appear that substantial impacts are possible and that the largest impacts may occur where they are most needed.”⁵² In Wake County, for example, when the school district switched from a policy of racial integration to one that emphasizes socioeconomic integration in 2000, much of the previous racial integration was preserved. (See profile on [Wake County](#).)

II. LEADING DISTRICTS PURSUING SOCIOECONOMIC SCHOOL INTEGRATION

This section of the paper presents profiles of three leading districts that are integrating student populations by socioeconomic status: Wake County, North Carolina; La Crosse, Wisconsin; and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

WAKE COUNTY (RALEIGH), NORTH CAROLINA⁵³

The Wake County, North Carolina school district, which includes Raleigh and surrounding areas, is the second largest district in North Carolina, and the twenty-first largest in the United States. In 2006–07 it had 128,000 students, and is projected to have 136,000 in 2007–08 educated in 153 schools. The total student population has doubled since 1990.⁵⁴

Located in the Research Triangle Park, the area is booming economically, and has a median family income of \$67,000, making it the richest county in North Carolina and the seventy-ninth-wealthiest nationally.⁵⁵ The public school student population in 2006–07 was 53.8 percent white, 26.8 percent African American, 10.2 percent Hispanic, 5.0 percent Asian, 3.9 percent multiracial, and 0.3 percent American Indian.⁵⁶ Among students, 28.2 percent receive free and reduced price lunch.⁵⁷

Geographically, the school district covers an expanse of 864 square miles, with the city of Raleigh at the center, and includes rural, suburban, and urban areas.⁵⁸ The unified district was created through a merger of Wake County and Raleigh Public Schools in 1976, motivated in part by

a desire to improve integration of city and suburb.⁵⁹ Although there was strong public opposition to the merger, the business community strongly supported it and the merger went through.⁶⁰ The outlying areas are about a two-hour bus ride from Raleigh.⁶¹

INTEGRATING BY RACE

In the early 1980s, Wake County sought to avoid court-ordered busing by adopting an extensive magnet school program, designed primarily to draw white students into schools located within the Raleigh “beltline.” Virtually all of the Raleigh schools were converted to magnets, offering curriculum extras, such as arts and music and foreign languages.⁶² To this day, about 30 percent of the magnet students are assigned from the local neighborhoods and the rest are drawn in from other areas, says Caroline Massengill, who has served as director of Wake’s magnet programs. Although many of the magnet programs are located in tough neighborhoods, several are oversubscribed, says Massengill, particularly those programs which allow students to take electives in elementary school.⁶³ Typically, there have been more than twice as many applicants as available spots in the Wake County magnet schools.⁶⁴ To make room for an influx of suburban white students, some black Raleigh students were reassigned to suburban schools. The county, which long had a minority school population of about 30 percent, set a goal that each school should have a minority enrollment between 15 percent and 45 percent.⁶⁵

In 1999, about 14,400 of the county’s students attended magnets. In addition, about 10,000 students chose to attend nine year-round schools, located mostly in suburban areas. As schools of choice, the year-round programs provide the opportunity to draw more diverse student bodies, though in practice they generally have not.⁶⁶

About one-third of the county’s schools were outside the racial goals in 1999, some by just a little, others by much more. Nevertheless, Wake County’s schools were far more integrated than schools nationally. Only 21 percent of black students attended majority minority schools, compared with 70 percent of black students across the nation.⁶⁷ And the racial integration translated into economic integration. Under the racial guidelines, only six of Wake County’s seventy-four elementary schools had concentrations of poverty above 40 percent.⁶⁸

SHIFTING TO INTEGRATION BY INCOME

In the late 1990s, Wake County’s integration plan was put in legal jeopardy when the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, which has jurisdiction over North Carolina, barred the use of race in student assignment in cases involving Montgomery County, Maryland, and Arlington, Virginia. Wake County officials began to explore ways to preserve the district’s successful integration program without relying on race per se, and they found two criteria that had a fairly strong correlation with race: income and achievement.

According to county data, more than 30 percent of minority students read below grade level, more than 50 percent receive subsidized lunches, and more than 60 percent fell under one criteria,

the other, or both.⁶⁹ In all, 15 percent of whites, 64 percent of all minority students, and 70 percent of blacks in third through eighth grades fell under at least one of the criteria.⁷⁰ A plan to balance better the low-income and low-achieving populations would clearly have the effect of providing some racial integration as well. Indeed, when discussions of the new income and achievement assignment criteria became public, opponents of racial desegregation cried foul. The plans looked like a back-door way of achieving racial integration under a new name.

In fact, critics appeared to have it exactly backwards: income was not a proxy for race, in the minds of Wake educators. Rather, race had been a proxy for income. The educational reason for wanting to save racial integration was that it had worked well to achieve income and achievement integration. Yes, the racial integration policy had been good socially (exposing children to diversity) and legally (the voluntary magnets prevented extensive busing), but the more powerful rationale for wanting racial integration was that it was good for the county's overall education achievement because it indirectly promoted income mixing. In Wake County, administrators and school board members began saying, "Isn't it really that we need to integrate kids according to class? It's really not about their skin color."⁷¹ Now that the legal posture had become reversed, with race a liability rather than a lever, Wake County could directly go after the type of integration most responsible for boosting achievement.

In describing the rationale behind a plan to promote income integration, board member Bill Fletcher explained, "The issue for me has always been educational effectiveness. That's what this policy is about, it's not social engineering."⁷² School board chairman Stephen Wray agreed: "I believe it is an advantage that racial diversity is a byproduct of this plan, but that is no longer the priority. Our objective has shifted from racial diversity to one that is focused on achievement. I am comfortable with the racial diversity being a byproduct of this new plan. Still, it is important to understand the difference."⁷³ As the school district attorney Ann Majestic told the *Raleigh News & Observer*, "We're really trying to look at educationally driven factors that might have (integrated schools) as a byproduct."⁷⁴ In fact, county officials did not even run the racial numbers on the effect of the new policy.⁷⁵

County school officials knew well that while Wake County boasted some of the top schools in the state, at other schools such as Creech Road Elementary, with roughly a 50 percent low-income student population, the educational setting was far from ideal. A *News & Observer* article noted that student mobility was so high that only 33 percent of Creech Road third graders had attended the school as kindergartners. And the PTA president complained that the school had "hardly any parental involvement."⁷⁶ Wake County had very publicly set a goal of having 95 percent of students at or above grade level in third and eighth grade by 2003—and income integration was a way to help realize that aim.⁷⁷

On January 10, 2000, in a move that would receive national attention, the Wake County school board voted to drop its goal that each school have a minority population of 15 percent to 45 percent and replaced it with a goal that all schools meet the following conditions: no more than 40 percent of its student body would be eligible for free or reduced price lunch and no more than 25

percent of its student body would be reading below grade level (averaged over two years).⁷⁸ The board's assignment guidelines also sought to minimize travel distances, make efficient use of school facilities, and maintain stability in assignment. The policy would be implemented through redrawing school boundaries, and also by using income rather than race in magnet school admissions, a practice that had already been in place for one year.⁷⁹ Assignment was to be based not on whether an individual child received free and reduced price lunch but on whether the children in her local neighborhood did. According to school officials, the 700 neighborhood zones in Wake County, known as "nodes," align very closely with the socioeconomic status of individuals in the node.⁸⁰ The nine-member board voted unanimously.⁸¹ The schools superintendent at the time, Jim Surratt, called it "a momentous decision."⁸²

Next came the hard work of implementing the policy. As schools currently stood, the free or reduced price lunch school populations ranged from 1 percent to a little more than 50 percent, while the below-grade-level reading percentages ranged from 6 percent to 36 percent.⁸³ Nineteen elementary schools and three middle schools exceeded the income or achievement limits or both.⁸⁴

The board needed to redraw boundaries anyway to fill four new elementary schools and one new middle school for the fall of 2000, so that is where the board began its work.⁸⁵ A plan floated in late January affecting 6,250 students drew opposition from some parents, though many of the complaints were aimed at the two-thirds of assignment shifts needed to fill the new schools, irrespective of the income and achievement guidelines.⁸⁶ At a March 6 public hearing, a number of criticisms were aired, though a reporter for the local paper noted, "There appears to be little opposition from parents at schools where low-achieving or poor students are being shifted to more affluent or high-performing schools."⁸⁷ On March 30, 2000, the school board adopted a scaled-back plan, affecting 3,644 students, and moving three elementary schools and one middle school into compliance with the goals set.⁸⁸

CHALLENGES

In subsequent years, because of explosive growth in school enrollment, boundary lines have been continually redrawn in Wake County. Many of the new residents are northerners, who have little understanding of the long and hard fought efforts to integrate the public schools throughout the south. An anti-integration group, called Assignment By Choice (ABC), has sprung up to oppose Wake County's socioeconomic integration plan. And public opinion polling has found stronger support among residents for neighborhood schools than for socioeconomic balance.⁸⁹

In seeking to reach the goal of capping low-income enrollment at 40 percent, Wake County faces two additional challenges. With rapid growth, Wake County has converted many regular schools to a staggered, year-round calendar (which allows more students to attend). In practice, these schools have proven less popular with low-income and minority students, and they tend not to be very diverse.⁹⁰ The other challenge is the outward push of suburban sprawl. Longer and longer bus rides between growing, outlying (and affluent) suburbs and poorer, urban areas in Raleigh have raised logistical difficulties for the plan.⁹¹ Since 2000, the school board has sometimes given in to angry parents and allowed district boundaries to be drawn in a way that exceeds the 40 percent low-income cap. In the 2005–06 school year, 31 of 116 elementary and middle schools (about one quarter) exceeded 40 percent low income, and five exceeded 60 percent.⁹²

On the whole, however, the Wake County district schools remains far more economically integrated than other large North Carolina districts, where schools routinely have 70 percent, 80 percent, 90 percent, and even 100 percent low-income schools.⁹³ And, despite vocal opposition from some disgruntled parents, business groups have been strongly supportive and Wake County voters have continually backed pro-integration school board candidates. In the most recent elections, in November 2005, candidates supporting integrated schools prevailed and maintained a six-person majority on the nine-member school board.⁹⁴

EFFECTS ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND RACIAL INTEGRATION

Part of the reason for political success of the program—despite concerns raised by some middle class families—is that the program has been a success, both in raising academic achievement and sustaining racial diversity in the schools. In Wake County, low-income and minority students perform better than low-income and minority students in other North Carolina districts that fail to break up concentrations of poverty. On the 2006 High School End of Course exams, 60.5 percent of low-income students in Wake County passed, compared with 43.0 percent in Durham County, 49.5 percent in Forsyth County, 52.3 percent in Guilford County, and 49.9 percent in Mecklenburg County. Meanwhile, the academic achievement of middle-class and white students is not in any sense hurt by socioeconomic integration plans. In Wake County, 85.4 percent of middle-class students passed the 2006 High School End of Course exams, compared with 74.8 percent in Mecklenburg, 67.9 percent in Durham, 75.3 percent in Forsyth, and 75.2 percent in Guilford.⁹⁵ Likewise, 82.2 percent of Wake County’s students graduated on time from high school in 2002–03—the second highest rate among the nation’s largest fifty districts nationally. By comparison, 66.2 percent of students in North Carolina and 69.6 percent nationally graduated on time.⁹⁶ With these types of academic results, Wake County’s program has received national attention.⁹⁷

At the same time, Wake has been quite successful in sustaining racial diversity through economic means. Susan Leigh Flinspach of the University of California and Karen Banks of Wake County found that under the old racial integration policy, 64.6 percent of Wake County schools were racially desegregated in 1999–00 and, two years later, under the new socioeconomic integration policy, 63.3 percent of schools were racially desegregated.⁹⁸ A legal challenge to Wake County’s socioeconomic integration program—which alleged that economic status was just a proxy for race—was denied because Wake County had “legitimate nondiscriminatory reasons” for using socioeconomic status.⁹⁹

LA CROSSE, WISCONSIN¹⁰⁰

For the oldest example of public school integration by socioeconomic status, we turn not to a left-wing hotspot like Greenwich Village, New York, but to La Crosse, Wisconsin, nestled in the nation’s heartland along the shores of the Mississippi River. Its voters are almost three times as likely to identify themselves as conservatives as liberal (40 percent versus 15 percent).¹⁰¹ Yet in the early 1990s, the community, which has 50,000 residents and 7,200 public school students, made national headlines for its plan to integrate schools by family income.¹⁰²

The school district, which includes some surrounding suburban towns (bringing the district’s adult population to 60,000), is narrow and extends vertically, bounded by the Mississippi on one side

and a line of bluffs on the other.¹⁰³ It covers about one hundred square miles, running fifteen miles in length and seven miles wide.¹⁰⁴ In the middle of this vertical strip, the town is divided by a marsh. The population on the northern side of the marsh has tended to be heavily blue collar, with brewery workers, railroad workers, and other laborers.¹⁰⁵ The southern side trends toward professionals, including white collar employees at of the University of Wisconsin, a small private college, and two major medical facilities.¹⁰⁶

Until the 1980s, the population was virtually all white, but during that decade, La Crosse experienced an influx of Hmong refugees from Laos, many of whom had been sponsored by local churches.¹⁰⁷ By 1992, Hmong refugees made up 12 percent of the population, and the schools were 15 percent minority—12 percent Asian American and 3 percent black, Hispanic, or Native American.¹⁰⁸ The new Hmong immigrants in La Crosse hardly fit the “model minority” Asian stereotype.¹⁰⁹ Whereas Chinese and Japanese-Americans have as groups achieved tremendous academic and economic success in the United States, the Hmong population from Laos is much newer and has as a group been less successful. Nationally, the Hmong poverty rate was nearly two-thirds. Nearly 60 percent of Indian Americans and 40 percent of Chinese Americans, but only 3 percent of the Hmong American population, had at least a bachelor’s degree.¹¹⁰ Until recently, the Hmong culture had no written language.¹¹¹ In addition, the Hmong population, researcher Stephen Plank notes, have a tradition “of early marriage and childbearing,” and have extremely large families by American standards.¹¹² Where whites average 1.7 children in a lifetime, and Mexican Americans 2.9, the average among the Hmong people is 11.9 children.¹¹³ In Wisconsin, gang violence among Hmong teenagers has received a fair amount of attention.¹¹⁴ In 1994, 72 percent of Asian children in La Crosse lived in poverty.¹¹⁵ But the white student population was hardly affluent. In 1992, when La Crosse implemented a program to integrate the elementary schools by income, two thirds of the 1,300 elementary students eligible for free lunch district-wide were white.¹¹⁶

The city has two regular high schools: Logan on the north side, and Central on the south side. Today, there are also three regular middle schools and ten regular elementary schools, along with five choice and charter schools.¹¹⁷ The city’s socioeconomic integration occurred in two phases: first among the high schools in the early 1980s, and then a decade later, and more explicitly, among the elementary schools.¹¹⁸

HIGH SCHOOL INTEGRATION

When superintendent Richard Swantz arrived in La Crosse in the late 1970s, Logan High School was considered the vocational school, and Central the college preparatory school. “The first thing that really hit me between the eyeballs,” recalls Swantz, was that “the North side high school had a completely different set of graduation standards. They were credits below the other high school. They didn’t offer the same curriculum.”¹¹⁹ Logan, says education reporter Joan Kent, was “considered the other side of the tracks. It was the place with the lowest scores. It was the place where you took more shop classes as opposed to college prep.”¹²⁰ Logan did not even offer the ACT or the SAT.¹²¹ Attorney James Birnbaum recalls that the two high schools split the town: “The northsiders did not associate with the southsiders. . . . Intracity athletic events were . . . emotional blood baths that mirrored the Civil War and the Crusades.”¹²²

Around the time of Swantz's arrival, Logan was rebuilt to accommodate more students, and because Central was overcrowded, Swantz proposed moving the boundary line, both to relieve overcrowding and to create more economic balance between the schools. His plan was to move some of the affluent children living just below the marsh to Logan High. The move was hugely controversial. "That marsh was like a Mason-Dixon line," Swantz recalled.¹²³ After much debate, the board was deadlocked by a four-to-four vote on Swantz's plan. The deciding vote would be cast by board member Kathryn Severance, whose own children would be moved from Central to Logan if she voted yes. Swantz told the *La Crosse Tribune's* Richard Mial, "I'll never forget that meeting. It was four to four and it went to her and she voted to make the change. There was a hush. Many people didn't believe that she would vote the way she did. It was a courageous call on her part."¹²⁴

"For the first time," wrote a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, "the sons and daughters of the affluent south side sat in the classrooms with blue-collar kids from across the tracks."¹²⁵ The board president at the time, Dr. Charles Miller, said his son, who was redistricted to Logan "was one of the first doctor's sons ever to go to that high school."¹²⁶

University of Wisconsin professor Joseph Heim recalls that "a lot of older people in La Crosse had a fit about this."¹²⁷ Some moved to avoid being in the new district; others rented houses to stay in the Central district.¹²⁸ Over time, however, the shifting of high school boundaries was considered, in the words of former Mayor John Medinger, "a huge success."¹²⁹ "By any measure," notes Heim, the "redrawing of the boundaries on that issue has had a very positive effect."¹³⁰ The economic makeup of the two schools is now very similar: In 2005–06, the free and reduced price lunch rate was 26.9 percent at Central and 37.2 percent at Logan.¹³¹ "The schools are completely equal now," Swantz says.¹³² Whereas before the boundary change, the test scores were "significantly different" at the two schools, since then they have been "similar year in and year out."¹³³ In 2005–06, the percentage of students proficient or advanced in tenth grade reading, math, and science was slightly higher at Logan, while Central performed slightly better in tenth grade language arts and social studies.¹³⁴

More importantly, the equalization did not come through leveling down. "Logan came up. Central did not go down," Swantz notes.¹³⁵ In 1979–80, before the boundary change, eleventh-graders at Logan scored in the forty-ninth percentile on standardized tests while Central eleventh-graders scored in the sixty-fifth percentile. By 1991, Logan students had risen to the sixty-second percentile, and Central students had moved up too, to the sixty-seventh percentile.¹³⁶ Ken French, a board member who had attended blue-collar Logan, says that in his day, "one in 100 would make something of themselves," but today Logan is "equal" to Central.¹³⁷ The number of high school dropouts district wide went from 122 in 1981–82, just after the merger, to 23 in 1990–91.¹³⁸ Medinger observes that "a lot of parents today would rather have their kids go to Logan for college prep than Central." Moving the boundary "took this community, which was divided between North and South, and made it a blended community for high school purposes."¹³⁹

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL INTEGRATION

The second phase of economic integration began in the early 1990s, when the district decided to build two new elementary schools to relieve overcrowding. The location of the schools required that boundary lines be redrawn and that a certain number of students be bused. One school built in the northeast corner of town had only sixty students living nearby, requiring that another 380 students be transported.¹⁴⁰ The location of these two schools was itself controversial, in that they were selected over the recommendation of a citizens' commission that the two schools be located in the middle of La Crosse, not on its edge.¹⁴¹

Seizing on this opportunity for change, teachers approached their principals, who in turn approached the superintendent, arguing that the education of children in La Crosse could be improved by breaking up concentrations of poverty.¹⁴² On May 17, 1991, all nine elementary school principals wrote the Board of Education urging that new boundaries be set in a way that would balance socioeconomic groups.¹⁴³ The board agreed, and on May 21, 1991, set ten guidelines for redistricting, one of which stated the following goal: "Redistricting shall attain a balance in each school which as nearly as possible reflects the socio-economic student profile in the total district."¹⁴⁴

Under the old boundary lines, the percentage of students participating in the free lunch program ranged from 4–5 percent in some schools to 65–67 percent in other schools.¹⁴⁵ In certain high-poverty schools, the difficulty of teaching large numbers of poor children was compounded by the language difficulties of the Hmong population, which was deemed by some parents and teachers to hold back all children in those classes.

THE RATIONALE

The drive for socioeconomic balance was based "on a variety of goals," according to Joseph Heim, "including improving the test scores and skills of all children in the district, attitudinal changes such as acceptance, tolerance and increased self-esteem, and improved educational outcomes which would result in higher incomes after graduation."¹⁴⁶ Noting low achievement levels in high-poverty schools, the principals, says Swantz, outlined a four-point rationale: better balance would "allow teachers to spend more time on lessons rather than constantly addressing the youngsters' problems; better reflect the experience youngsters would have in a multi-cultural society; allow higher income youngsters to think beyond designer jeans and sneakers; and provide struggling students with more positive role models."¹⁴⁷

The teachers union strongly supported the plan, individual teachers were instrumental in a coalition supporting the plan, and the union's attorney, James Birnbaum, was a leading proponent of socioeconomic integration.¹⁴⁸ Teachers at poor schools were "concerned with classes dominated by poor children," Joseph Heim and Pamela Rodgers note.¹⁴⁹ Teachers said students in high-poverty schools suffered because the "pool of experiences" in such schools was sharply limited.¹⁵⁰ An ABC *Nightline* reporter noted, "Teachers complained too much time [at two high poverty schools] went to personal problems less affluent kids bring, instead of to teaching."¹⁵¹ A fifteen-year veteran teacher at predominantly low-income Hamilton Elementary School said the children in high poverty schools had "few role models."¹⁵²

The principals noted that poor parents tended to be less involved in the schools, and integration would mean the involvement of some middle-class parents in all schools.¹⁵³ There was also a hope that economic mixing would raise the aspirations of poor children. In an interview with district officials, *Nightline* reported that they expected that “lower-income students . . . will not only improve language skills but begin to improve their own dreams about what they might strive for.”¹⁵⁴ School board member Marianne Loeffler noted that “we can become another slum-laden Detroit or Chicago, or we can become something better. We can bring hope to our poor children.”¹⁵⁵

Part of the impetus also came from teachers and principals in high-poverty schools who knew that, despite their best efforts, their schools would come off poorly when ranked by standardized test scores in the local papers. “It always kind of irritated me” reports principal Terry Witzke, that his school, Franklin Elementary, generally “scored at the bottom” not because the staff was less skilled but because of the socioeconomic status of the students.¹⁵⁶

Swantz also believed that high-poverty schools tend to have lower expectations. “These schools that have a lot of poor children in them, I think the teachers with all the best intentions did set a lower standard.”¹⁵⁷ One could try to exhort teachers to raise expectations, he said, but socioeconomic mixing “is the way to do it.”¹⁵⁸ At the time of the move, Joyce Shanks, a professor at the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse, told the *La Crosse Tribune* that studies found working class students are more likely to be taught by rote while middle class children are more likely to have teachers emphasizing analytical and investigative skills.¹⁵⁹

Proponents of socioeconomic balance also pointed to the success in the high schools.¹⁶⁰ Swantz noted that, once the high school boundary was moved to better balance the schools economically, the test score gap narrowed from 20 percent to 5 percent.¹⁶¹ Attorney James Birnbaum reports that Logan had been “remarkably inferior” to Central and “was in danger of losing its accreditation” but with the boundary change, “La Crosse has two equally superior high schools by all measurable criteria. It is hard to argue with success.”¹⁶² Proponents also noted that Emerson Elementary, which already had a mix of economic groups, had traditionally scored first or second among the district’s elementary schools.¹⁶³

“The main argument for what La Crosse is doing, to put it crassly,” declared Professor Christopher Jencks at the time, “is that advantaged kids are a resource for any kid in a school. . . . Kids who read books, who have values we want others to acquire . . . are a scarce commodity, and it’s not easy to argue that because some families have money they should have a monopoly on all those nice kids.”¹⁶⁴ According to Swantz, growing up in a poor family presented one disadvantage in itself, and “when you get a lot of them going to the same school, it’s like a double whammy.”¹⁶⁵ In sum, Jim Birnbaum has argued, “regardless of efforts to equalize staff, curriculum and physical facilities, children segregated by socioeconomic class were inherently denied equal educational opportunities.”¹⁶⁶ A pro-desegregation group, calling itself the Community Attitudes Task Force, declared: “Perhaps the most important equalizer, one of the most important factors in determining academic success, the diverse composition of the educational peer group, is currently being denied our disadvantaged population. . . . Peer role models and peer groups are learning opportunities for which there is no substitute. No matter how equal the trappings, there will be no equal educational opportunity as long as we have schools segregated by economic class, culture, and race.”¹⁶⁷

La Crosse officials also emphasized that everyone would benefit from ethnic and economic diversity. The assistant superintendent, David Johnston, observed that for “too long” diversity had been looked at only in terms of race. “There is another piece” to diversity, he continued, “that is simply as large. And that is the socioeconomics.”¹⁶⁸

The principals were also hearing from other business community leaders and the Rotary Club that businesses wanted employees who could “work with other people cooperatively” and that they hoped integration might promote those social skills.¹⁶⁹ Teachers Betsy Stannard and Cathy Fuchs reported that “business is telling us” that “people have to be able to work together. The number one problem in the workplace is not knowing your job or not knowing the skills for your job. It’s getting along with other people. And that’s the number one reason for people being terminated. . . . It is people with skills not being able to get along with coworkers.”¹⁷⁰

Liberals such as attorney Birnbaum felt it was important for wealthier children “to see what the world is really like” and to “develop some compassion”—which was unlikely to happen in a school where “you’ve got 98 percent high socioeconomic groups.”¹⁷¹ Another parent explained, “I don’t think children should be taught that because they have money you can live in a separate world.”¹⁷²

Similarly, poor children would be exposed to worlds that they did not know existed. For example, Johnston said, in the fall when children recount what they did over the summer, in the low socioeconomic status schools “there would be silence. Nobody went any place.” In a mixed class, there are a diversity of summer experiences, “some neat, intellectual, experiential stuff for youngsters and teachers to chew on.”¹⁷³

School board member Roger LeGrand said he was animated by the idea of the American common school: “This idea of the public school as a place where everybody gets a great opportunity, whether you are rich or poor, black or white, Hmong, or anybody. And there is this wonderful situation where you all go to the same school and you get to mix.” The idea, he continues, is “the old melting pot idea. I thought that was great. That was one of the great things of America that we put everybody together. And when you do tend to isolate, especially poor kids, I think they tend to feed off the poverty.”¹⁷⁴ Heim and Rodgers, interviewing people on both sides of the issue in La Crosse, found that several participants believed socioeconomic integration “went to the very basis of what public education is all about, and its very role in a democratic society”—a view that “the citizens in the district appear to agree with.”¹⁷⁵

La Crosse officials could have framed integration in more traditional racial terms, but they chose to emphasize socioeconomic status instead. “We were very careful to never look at it as a racial issue,” recalls Swantz. “It was from the standpoint of poverty.”¹⁷⁶ Officials had several reasons.

First, on the merits, supporters of the plan, such as Birnbaum, said that in education, color was not the key determinant to opportunity, it was class.¹⁷⁷ Swantz said, “teachers had been telling me for years that when you get a high concentration of children like that [poor] it really makes for some very, very special challenges.”¹⁷⁸ Principal Terry Witzke believed “It’s not a matter of race but economics that divides our country.”¹⁷⁹

Second, in La Crosse, to treat the issue as racial was to marginalize the larger economic issue. Two-thirds of those on the free lunch program were white.¹⁸⁰ Of 1,300 children receiving free lunch in 1992, only 400 were Asian.¹⁸¹ Medinger notes that “there is a lot of white poverty . . . a lot of people working in this community [making] \$6.00, \$7.00, \$8.00” an hour.¹⁸² Long before the influx of Hmong children, the high school divide in La Crosse had illustrated to all the importance of class.

Third, supporters did not want to inflame racial passions. “The last thing we wanted to do,” says Birnbaum, “was to create some sort of racial issue.” By emphasizing socioeconomic status, proponents sought “to avoid making it into some real polarizing racial issue that would have not served anything.”¹⁸³ If race were allowed to be the focus, Johnston says, “you’re going to have people playing the race card. . . . And it’s an almost impossible game to play once people start playing those cards.”¹⁸⁴ So determined was the district to deracialize the issue, says Johnston, that administrators did not run the racial numbers on various schools under the socioeconomic plan, so if anyone asked, administrators could honestly say they did not know, that race “was not the issue.”¹⁸⁵

At the same time, proponents knew that racial desegregation would flow from socioeconomic desegregation. David S. Tatel, then a Washington civil rights attorney, said the La Crosse plan “sounds intriguing to me because it is a way of accomplishing racial and ethnic integration without using race and ethnicity as a factor.”¹⁸⁶ Thai Vue, a leader in La Crosse’s Hmong community, noted that 80 percent of Hmong pupils received lunch subsidies.¹⁸⁷

THE PLAN

In January, 1992, the school board voted eight to one to redraw boundaries in pursuit of its May 1991 objective, to distribute students on the free lunch program more evenly throughout the district’s elementary schools.¹⁸⁸ Under the new proposal, of the 3,500 elementary school students in La Crosse, 1900 (54 percent) would remain in their old schools, 800 (23 percent) would go to different schools in order to fill the two new schools, and 800 (23 percent) would attend different schools to create better socioeconomic balance.¹⁸⁹ The total cost of the new busing—much of it necessary whether or not socioeconomic balance was required—was \$150,000 for fourteen more buses. In a budget of \$45.2 million, this represented about one-third of one percent of spending.¹⁹⁰

The district chose free lunch status (130 percent of the poverty line) as opposed to free and reduced lunch status (185 percent of the poverty line) as the income cutoff, Johnston says, because in central Wisconsin, someone making almost double the poverty line was not generally considered poor.¹⁹¹ No attempt was made to distinguish between upper-middle-class and middle-class students. Witzke says the free lunch data were available, and “there wasn’t a real controversy about using that particular.”¹⁹² The free lunch criterion, Johnston says, was “simple. It’s straightforward. It’s accepted by everybody and everybody understands that. And you don’t have to explain it for a month.”¹⁹³ Across the district, 30 percent of students were eligible for free lunch, and the board set its goal accordingly: socioeconomic integration will have been reached when 15–45 percent of the student body in every school consists of free lunch recipients.¹⁹⁴

In general, the new boundary lines required busing of poor students to new or previously middle-class schools. A University of Wisconsin study found that children receiving free lunch were twice as likely to be bused under the plan as those who were not.¹⁹⁵ Children living in the middle-class area known as the “Jefferson Island” were the one exception: previously assigned to Emerson Elementary, under the new plan they were reassigned to poorer Jefferson.¹⁹⁶ The Jefferson provision proved the most controversial element of the plan.¹⁹⁷

SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAM

The success of the program can be judged on four criteria: Was the plan politically viable and able to withstand attack? To what degree did the plan effectively integrate students by economic status? To the extent schools were integrated, did social mixing occur between students across class lines? Finally, to what extent did socioeconomic integration raise academic achievement and improve the life chances of students?

Political success? The board’s January 1992 vote sent shock waves through La Crosse. Opponents of the new plan attacked incumbent board members and Superintendent Richard Swantz as “big spenders.”¹⁹⁸ The Chamber of Commerce initially opposed the plan, and the mayor, Patrick Zielke, argued that busing would hurt homes sales.¹⁹⁹ In a regularly scheduled April 1992 election, three challengers replaced three incumbents who had supported the integration plan. In a special recall election held in July 1992, four more incumbents were replaced by opponents of the integration plan, giving anti-busing forces a seven-to-two majority on the board.²⁰⁰ Recall proponents noted that they did especially well in low-income wards, suggesting there might have been a backlash among the supposed beneficiaries of the program.²⁰¹

The newly elected board invited nationally recognized busing opponent David Armor to speak about alternatives to the plan; and three weeks before the plan was to go into effect, the board voted to allow students to opt-out of the new boundary guidelines, creating a “safety valve” for disgruntled parents.²⁰² The recall leaders had publicly sought Swantz’s resignation and it was widely believed that the recall success might “cost Swantz his job.”²⁰³

Up to this point, La Crosse’s experiment looked like a classic story of a wild-eyed liberal idea rejected by sensible midwestern voters. A July 1992 *Washington Post* story was entitled, “The School Board Just Lost Touch.”²⁰⁴ The *Economist* declared the same month that the La Crosse experiment “looks doomed.”²⁰⁵ Mickey Kaus wrote that “La Crosse is encountering the same sort of resistance that accompanied busing for racial integration.”²⁰⁶

But the story does not end there. What the national media missed—the developments over the subsequent ten months—is far more significant. On July 28, 1992, the *La Crosse Tribune* published results of an informal reader survey, which found that 69 percent wanted the board to leave the boundaries alone for the time being, compared with 16 percent who wished the old boundaries to be restored.²⁰⁷ A local television poll found 70 percent of parents had “made their peace with the new boundaries.”²⁰⁸ When the new recall board met to consider whether to repeal the socioeconomic integration plan, twenty-three residents spoke, all of them in favor of the integration

plan. Thai Vue, a Hmong immigrant, was among those speaking in favor of busing, and received a standing ovation from two hundred people attending the meeting.²⁰⁹ The new board voted to repeal the official socioeconomic policy but also voted five to four to keep the existing boundary lines on which the 15–45 percent goals were based and to go ahead with busing aimed at socioeconomic balance.²¹⁰

Just nine months later, in April 1993, a group of school board candidates supportive of integration, running under the banner of Coalition for Children, managed to win back three seats, “clobbering” candidates who had been elected the previous July under the anti-integration theme.²¹¹ Researcher Stephen Plank notes that “the challengers ousted the incumbents by fairly large margins of victory. The top vote-getter among the newly elected challengers was a Hmong man who strongly supported the balance plan.”²¹² The three recall members got the lowest vote totals. The recall board members, says Birnbaum, “were scrubbed out and scrubbed out dramatically.”²¹³ Joseph Heim and Pamela Rodgers pointed out that “the School Board had come full circle in one year’s time.”²¹⁴ An editorial in the *Milwaukee Journal* lauded La Crosse voters for their “counter-counterrevolution.” Comparing La Crosse’s experience with that of Milwaukee, which took steps to integrate only after a court battle, the *Journal* marveled that La Crosse “did the right thing on its own.”²¹⁵

During their brief tenure, the recall board had created a loophole for those who wished to be exempt from the plan, but the basic boundaries held.²¹⁶ In 1998, several years after the controversy, Dick Swantz remained as superintendent. Medinger noted that by the late 1990s none of those running for school board argued for changing the boundaries back. “People seem pretty content with life in La Crosse school district right now,” he said.²¹⁷ La Crosse was so calm that the town was having trouble attracting candidates to contest openings on the board. What explains the dramatic turnabout? Observers point to a number of factors.

First, the problems that opponents of desegregation forecasted did not materialize. As principal Witzke has observed, “the world did not collapse with this happening.”²¹⁸ Heim says La Crosse residents “found out that kids were not destroyed while riding buses.”²¹⁹ The *La Crosse Tribune* noted that even at schools whose boundary changes were most controversial, students appeared happy: “at Northside and Jefferson schools, eyes of the boundary storm, students appeared to like their new schools,” reporter Joan Kent found in a story entitled, “New Schools, New Friends.”²²⁰ The busing itself had advantages: it was good for the children in the cold weather, and safer, because kids did not have to cross busy streets.²²¹

Second, many parents found that integration was good for the children. Joan Kent, a reporter viewed by some as sympathetic to the recall effort, found that six months after the plan was implemented, “people on both sides” were pleased to see that poor students were learning about middle-class experiences and wealthier children “were learning how people who don’t have quite as much get along.”²²² In March 1993, Kent, interviewing fifty children, twenty-five parents, and twenty-five teachers, found that “almost all” were “now comfortable” with the new boundaries and the socioeconomic integration plan. In April, 1993, the *La Crosse Tribune* noted that an unscientific survey of 1,265 elementary school parents attending parent-teacher conferences found 65 percent believed the district “should continue to work toward [socioeconomic] balance in the schools” and

69 percent were “satisfied” with the new boundaries.²²³ “Once the kids got into the schools, hell, they loved it,” recalls board member Ken French. “They had no problem with it.”²²⁴

Third, parents grew accustomed to the new boundary lines. Even if socioeconomic status had not been an issue, Johnston says, the district had to redraw boundaries to fill two new schools, and “whenever we redraw boundaries . . . we have people pissed.”²²⁵ In this case, Johnston says, “every boundary line got moved” so roughly half the district’s children were affected—half of those for socioeconomic reasons, half for space reasons.²²⁶ Over time, however, families became used to the change.

Fourth, the effort to keep the issue from becoming racialized appears to have succeeded, to the surprise of the national and international press. The *Economist*, writing after the recall, said because the Hmong population was disproportionately poor, “class divisions” in La Crosse “may be no more than race divisions under another name.”²²⁷ La Crosse residents did not see it that way, however. As Kent has remarked, “with most people it wasn’t a racial thing.”²²⁸ Heim’s survey research found that whereas racial integration raised “a red flag,” socioeconomic integration was seen as “less onerous to people.”²²⁹ Although La Crosse citizens did object to busing, Heim’s La Crosse survey found that “mixing people of different classes just made a lot of common sense to people; . . . People can accept” socioeconomic integration, he found—indeed “a fairly substantial majority” favored “socioeconomic balance.”²³⁰

Heim notes that a similar effort to desegregate by socioeconomic status in nearby Wausau, Wisconsin—where race was more explicitly at issue—was much less politically stable. In Wausau, an opposition recall group was elected and stayed in power, and the superintendent was replaced.²³¹ Heim’s polling data suggest that “emphasizing a blending of classes rather than racial integration has a greater chance of public support, and ultimately, success.”²³²

Fifth, much of the original anger in the recall was aimed not at socioeconomic integration, but at the construction of the new schools, which was deemed extravagant. Kent notes that in previous years, the district had closed schools, and it struck some residents as absurd to pay for the construction of two new schools. Wasteful spending—not socioeconomic integration itself—fed much of the recall anger, particularly among the elderly.²³³ When the recall effort began in January 1992, organizers said “boundaries are not the issue”; instead, they said “they want to oust the entire nine-member board on grounds of fiscal irresponsibility.”²³⁴ Over time, realizing that the new schools could not be unbuilt, people accepted the new regime.

Sixth, opposition from the poor did not materialize. At the time of the recall election, those opposed to desegregation did quite well in poor districts, which suggested to some recall supporters that there was a backlash among the poor, who may have interpreted socioeconomic integration as condescending. In fact, much of that vote apparently reflected anger among poor elderly La Crosse residents about the spending issue.²³⁵ When poor parents became organized in the subsequent election, they gave solid support for integration. In particular, the Hmong population came out strongly for the plan, because “they thought it was good for their kids.”²³⁶ Although socioeconomic mixing might have in some instances put poor children in an awkward position, subjecting them to rich classmates’ bragging about their advantages, Johnston says this did not seem to occur much in the schools and that at hearings, low-income parents generally spoke in favor of balancing

schools.²³⁷ Notes board member LeGrand, “I never heard any complaint [about economic balancing] from anybody [whose children received free lunch] during the whole period of time. . . . I never heard that at all.”²³⁸

Polling data bear out these impressions. Heim and Rodgers have found that in October 1991, north side residents, who were generally less affluent, were “somewhat more in favor” of socioeconomic balance than south side residents: the margin of support was 50 percent to 38 percent among northside residents and 43 percent to 38 percent among south side residents.²³⁹ The strongest support for “busing for socioeconomic balance” in Heim’s polling came from those earning less than \$10,000 a year (53 percent in favor, 34 percent opposed).²⁴⁰ Analysis of the July 1992 returns found the well-off State Road area provided a heavy vote for the recall.²⁴¹

John Medinger, who calls himself a blue-collar “beer-drinking chicken-wing” Robert Kennedy Democrat very suspicious of limousine liberals, dismisses the notion that socioeconomic integration was considered patronizing or condescending. While “affluent people” made that argument, among poor and working class voters, Medinger “didn’t hear too much of that.”²⁴² French suggested that “the ones that are complaining most about busing are doctors, lawyers, and realtors, and people like that.”²⁴³ Swantz reported that opposition was coming from “the silk stocking crowd.”²⁴⁴

Seventh, the district’s teachers, who helped launch the plan, continued to play an important supportive role throughout the debate. According to Swantz, the “teachers were the ones that really kept me confident [that] many children were going to gain from this.”²⁴⁵ Teachers did have to deal with a new, broader range of manifest ability among students, but two teachers—Betsy Stannard and Cathy Fuchs—have said that using cooperative learning and workshops allowed them to capitalize on these ranges rather than making them an impediment to learning. In their new school, North Woods, Stannard and Fuchs had children both from housing projects and \$500,000 homes. Employing reading and writing workshops, the teachers said, “allow[s] you to teach kids of all ranges” in one class.²⁴⁶ On balance, teachers maintained that poverty concentrations posed the greatest burden to teaching and that a middle class environment is more conducive to learning.²⁴⁷ The mix of students at North Woods was unquestionably easier to teach than the largely poor populations at schools such as Hamilton or Jefferson.²⁴⁸ And the teachers did not see evidence that the rich kids at North Woods made the poor kids feel bad; the most invidious comparisons, they said, tended to come in the homogenous schools where some got a new car at age sixteen and others do not.²⁴⁹ The teachers union endorsed integration in October 1991, with only a few teachers dissenting.²⁵⁰ Teachers opposed the recall effort by a vote of 435 to 29.²⁵¹

As the plan was implemented, the overall support for socioeconomic integration increased. In 1991, support for socioeconomic balance stood at 46 percent (37 percent opposed); by 1994, support had grown to 59 percent (29 percent opposed).²⁵² Significantly, parents led the way in increasing support. Public opinion data clearly show that those most directly involved in the socioeconomic integration plan—parents of children in the schools—were more supportive than nonparents. Before the plan went into effect, the difference was slight (of parents, 48 percent were in favor, 33 percent opposed; of nonparents 45 percent were in favor, 37 percent opposed).²⁵³ Once the plan was put into place, the gap between parents and nonparents gradually grew.²⁵⁴ By 1994, 65

percent of parents supported socioeconomic balance (24 percent opposed), compared to 57 percent of nonparents (31 percent were opposed).²⁵⁵ As Heim and Rodgers note, “It appears that many parents may have reversed their positions, both on opposition to socioeconomic balance and on the use of socioeconomic balance as a factor in any future redrawing of school boundaries. In essence, it appears that parents have become strong supporters of the concept and remain very satisfied with the School District’s educational performance.”²⁵⁶ In March, 1993, even Kevin O’Keefe, who organized the recall, told the *Milwaukee Sentinel* that the socioeconomic balance plan was working well. “To expose your children to other cultures and other beliefs—that’s certainly a good idea.”²⁵⁷

By 1994, two years after implementation of the plan, public confidence in the school system returned to pre-balance levels. In 1990, 75 percent of residents expressed satisfaction with the La Crosse public school system, a number that sunk to 64 percent in 1992, at the height of the controversy. But by 1994, however, satisfaction levels had returned to 76 percent.²⁵⁸ In 1996, board member Neil Duresky, who had been critical of socioeconomic balance, told *Education Week* that “the plan is working well,” a view he continued to hold in a 1998 interview.²⁵⁹ An April 2001 survey found that 64 percent of residents favored socioeconomic balance, and only 21 percent opposed.²⁶⁰

In the time period since then, La Crosse has continued to push for socioeconomic balance. For example, in recent years La Crosse created a new set of choice and charter schools, and eligibility for free and reduced price lunch is one of the factors in admissions, with the goal of moving all choice schools toward the district average on subsidized lunches.²⁶¹

Desegregation Success? In the plan’s first year of implementation, the district made substantial strides toward the goal that each elementary school should be within a 15–45 percent free lunch range. In 1991–92, only 44 percent of schools (four of nine) fell within the desired range; but after the plan’s adoption, in 1992–93, 82 percent of schools (nine of eleven) fell in the range.²⁶² In the 1997–98 schools year, nine of eleven schools still fell in the 15–45 percent range for free lunch, with two—Hamilton (67 percent) and Jefferson (56 percent)—outside.²⁶³ By 2006–07, ten of twelve elementary schools fell within a plus or minus fifteen percentage point range of the district average (36 percent).²⁶⁴ Overall, then, between 1991–92 and 2006–07, compliance moved from 44 percent to 83 percent. In addition, as the ACLU noted in its *amicus* brief on the Seattle and Louisville cases, La Crosse’s system-wide socioeconomic integration plan was more successful in promoting racial integration as a byproduct than less aggressive programs elsewhere.²⁶⁵

Contrary to expectations, fewer than 200 of 4,000 students slated for busing took advantage of the opt-out provision enacted by the recall board.²⁶⁶ The 1992 actual enrollment (which allowed for transfers) was quite close to the estimates based on the new boundaries in most schools, with the exceptions of Hamilton (estimated at 41 percent free lunch, the actual enrollment was 63 percent) and New Northside (estimated at 33.3 percent free lunch, actual enrollment 50 percent).²⁶⁷

Neither was there a mass exodus of middle-class parents to private schools.²⁶⁸ With several Catholic and Lutheran elementary schools in the area, there was plenty of opportunity for white middle class flight.²⁶⁹ In March 1993, a year after the boundary change, the *La Crosse Tribune* reported that private schools had seen an increase in enrollment of only “about 40 students.”²⁷⁰ Superintendent Swantz noted that “the district has continued through this entire experience to

increase its percentage of ‘capture,’ [the] percent of children that are school aged that are in the public schools.”²⁷¹ Indeed public schools continued to experience “significant overcrowding.”²⁷²

Contrary to the prediction of some opponents of integration, the plan did not result in the lowering of property values. Even in the Jefferson Island—a middle-class neighborhood in which students were moved from middle-class Emerson to previously poor Jefferson—property values did not decline, and indeed increased “significantly.”²⁷³

Social Success? One of the major goals of administrators in La Crosse was socialization across economic and racial lines. Critics have noted, however, that individuals from different backgrounds sometimes fail to mix, even when placed in heterogenous environments. In La Crosse, the evidence suggests a significant amount of social mixing has occurred.

Anecdotally, reports in the *La Crosse Tribune* indicate that students adjusted well to the new mix of classmates and did not segregate themselves. A guidance counselor at State Road elementary told the Tribune, “99 percent of the new problems are not rich and poor; they’re new kid on the block.”²⁷⁴ Interviewing teachers in March 1993, the newspaper found, “On the playgrounds, children initially stayed with kids they knew. Now, the main separation seems to be between boys and girls.”²⁷⁵

Stephen Plank, studying under James Coleman at the University of Chicago, looked at socialization among students after La Crosse implemented its economic desegregation plan for his 1995 doctoral dissertation. Plank was interested in exploring the degree to which students from different economic and ethnic backgrounds mixed in La Crosse elementary schools and whether certain teaching techniques brought about more successful integration of students.²⁷⁶ Looking at fourth grade students in five elementary schools (and ten classrooms) in the 1993–94 school year, the second year of La Crosse’s balance plan, Plank measured social mixing by asking students to name “friends they play with at recess, two classmates they would enjoy working with on a science project, classmates who have been to their homes, and participation in extracurricular activities.” He also personally observed the students, conducting research in the fall and then again in the spring.²⁷⁷

Plank observed that students who were allowed to select their seats the first day of class chose to sit with students like themselves. In one classroom with six clusters of desks, three of the clusters were occupied almost exclusively by high-socioeconomic-status students (ten of the eleven students), while the other three clusters were almost all low-socioeconomic status (eight of the nine students). By the spring, however, across the ten classrooms, there was a great deal of mixing across racial and class lines, with almost all workmate groups having a mix of children. Plank found that “most of the [workmate] cliques were heterogenous with respect to the race/SES classification.”²⁷⁸ Similarly, by the spring, “most of the playmate cliques were heterogenous with respect to the race/SES classification.”²⁷⁹ By contrast, Plank found that both workmate and playmate integration by gender was “rare in all of the classrooms.”²⁸⁰

In a January 2007 retrospective article on the La Crosse plan fifteen years later, a reporter for the *La Crosse Tribune* wrote that students who participated in the integration plan “credit the decision with changing their lives by exposing them to a world they wouldn’t have otherwise known.”²⁸¹

Improved Life Chances Success? Has socioeconomic integration in La Crosse produced higher test scores and improved life chances for the poor? What was the effect on the achievement of middle-class children? There have been no carefully designed and controlled studies on this question, so it is hard to say definitively, but the overall picture is positive and suggests the plan is working.

In November 2000, eight years into the plan, La Crosse associate superintendent Woodrow Wiedenhoefst noted, “overall achievement scores have been better over the last eight years with a trend of improvement.”²⁸² A 2002 report concluded, “While it is not possible to draw neat lines of cause and effect, it can be said that achievement in La Crosse is at a fairly high level considering the economic status of many of its students.”²⁸³

Low-income students in La Crosse generally perform better on state tests than low-income students statewide, even though the overall student peer group in La Crosse is somewhat poorer than Wisconsin students (36 percent are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, compared with 31 percent statewide).²⁸⁴ The differences tend to grow over time, and are larger in math than in reading. In the fourth grade, 64 percent of economically disadvantaged La Crosse students were proficient or advanced in math in 2004–05, compared with 53 percent of economically disadvantaged fourth graders statewide, an eleven-percentage point advantage. In eighth grade, the advantage for low-income La Crosse students was four percentage points (53 percent versus 49 percent), and in tenth grade, the advantage for low-income La Crosse students was fifteen percentage points (59 percent versus 44 percent advanced or proficient). In reading, scores were similar for low-income La Crosse students and low-income Wisconsin student in fourth grade and eighth grade: in fourth grade, 66 percent of economically disadvantaged La Crosse students were proficient or advanced in reading, exactly the same percentage as low-income students statewide. In eighth grade, low-income La Crosse students beat low-income students statewide by one percentage point (67 percent proficient and advanced versus 66 percent). And by tenth grade, low-income La Crosse students had a six percentage point advantage in reading (59 percent versus 53 percent).²⁸⁵

“In talking to teachers overall it’s been good for kids,” school board member Duresky observed.²⁸⁶ The transformation of teaching from front-of-the-classroom instruction to cooperative learning made the diversity an asset rather than an impediment to learning, one principal has remarked.²⁸⁷ North Woods Elementary school teachers Betsy Stannard and Cathy Fuchs noted that low-income students who came in “raw” learned, over time, from other students “what is appropriate.”²⁸⁸

At the time of implementation, proponents and opponents of the plan sparred over its potential effect on parental involvement. Opponents argued involvement would decline: “The farther away their youngsters are taken for schooling, the more difficult it is to involve parents,” opined *Chicago Tribune* columnist Joan Beck.²⁸⁹ La Crosse administrators, by contrast, hoped that parental involvement would increase at previously low-income schools. Proponents of the program were right. “The schools that had very low functioning PTA and parent groups,” notes David Johnston, “now have higher functioning ones.”²⁹⁰ At Jefferson, for example, the influx of students from the middle-class Jefferson Island rejuvenated the PTA. In March 1993, the *La Crosse Tribune*

noted, “all the Jefferson PTA board members this year are from the busing area, partially dispelling fears that increased distances to school would discourage parent participation.”²⁹¹

Board member LeGrand credits the socioeconomic balance plan with helping to integrate the poor Hmong community. “It is happening here,” he said. “[The Hmong] people are doing a lot better than they did when they first came out of the camps. . . . They are doing the same thing as other immigrant groups did. And the key to it is the public schools.”²⁹² At North Woods elementary, Swantz has observed: “A fourth grade teacher noted children talking about their futures and career aspirations. This teacher, who taught many impoverished children the previous year, had never heard children speak that way.” At Jefferson, which initially went from 69 percent free lunch to 43 percent, the district said it found “teachers spending less time promoting ‘on task behaviors’ . . . [and spending] more time on learning.” In addition, the district observed reduced behavioral problems and increased scores at Jefferson.²⁹³

CRITICISM

Although generally successful, the La Crosse plan is not without flaws. In its emphasis on class, not race, it was novel and on the cutting edge, but the plan was also strikingly old fashioned in its use of busing and assignment rather than public school choice. Socioeconomic balance was but one of ten factors used by the board in redistricting, and the board also tried to maximize traditional principles of neighborhood assignments.²⁹⁴ As a result, the balance plan was complicated by geographic constraints in a way that public school choice plans are not, and at the same time, where neighborhood assignment was not honored, parents were angered and frustrated.

At the time La Crosse adopted its plan, some education experts criticized the reliance on compulsory assignment rather than public school choice and the magnet model.²⁹⁵ Clearly, the command and control model caused political trouble.²⁹⁶ Heim’s polling found that while La Crosse residents “seem to sense that having their kids mixed with other socioeconomic classes was a good idea,” they “don’t like busing, in particular.”²⁹⁷ In an October 1991 poll, for example, residents favored socioeconomic balance as a guideline for school boundaries (46 percent in favor, 37 percent opposed). However, “when busing was included as the method used to create greater balance,” Heim found, “opposition increased and support dropped” with 47 percent opposed and only 38 percent in favor.²⁹⁸ Some have noted that because students were subjected to mandatory busing “public hearings were directed at busing not educational concerns.”²⁹⁹ The redrawing of boundaries also presented logistical difficulties, particularly with Hamilton Elementary, since there are limits on the extent to which districts can be gerrymandered.

Following the battles over busing, both sides began looking toward choice and the Cambridge controlled choice model.³⁰⁰ Kevin O’Keefe, a leading opponent of busing, told *Nightline*, “Maybe choice is a good compromise. . . . We can have schools that have a more proportionate mix of poor and non-poor, but it’s something that the parents feel some ownership in and have confidence in, and I think that would be real positive.”³⁰¹ Though recall proponents said they were champions of the “neighborhood school” in fact, a paid advertisement in July 1992 proclaimed in its lead item: “District-Wide School Choice . . . to allow each school to compete for students.”³⁰² Even the consultant David Armor recommended to the La Crosse board an alternative involving parental school choice or magnets.³⁰³ Choice, LeGrand says, might have addressed the key complaint people

had about the redrawn boundaries: “The people who really just went nuts, I think it was people who felt they had sort of lost control.” He continued, “I think the most important thing is having parents have more of a say. . . . What people react strongly to is really being told and not having a choice.” By the late 1990s, LeGrand, who was back on the board, said, “we are trying to get more choice of schools. . . . My vision is provide a choice with a socioeconomic component.” Give parents three choices, he argues, but “keep the socioeconomic guidelines.” That combination, he says, is something “even some of the conservative people on the board are willing to look at.”³⁰⁴ Indeed, Julie Vollmer, an opponent of the redistricting, says, “I do believe in socioeconomic balance. My problem is . . . that you cannot force the parents to do something that they choose not to do.” Vollmer declared she was “very interested in the Cambridge model” of public school choice to promote integration.³⁰⁵

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS³⁰⁶

Cambridge, Massachusetts, a city of more than 100,000, located near Boston, is the site of one of the nation’s best known public school choice programs.³⁰⁷ Although many people associate Cambridge with famous universities such as Harvard and MIT, it is also home to large numbers of disadvantaged people. Among students in the district, 47.4 percent were eligible for free and reduced price lunch in the 2005–06 school year. The schools have a very diverse student population, which is 36.8 percent African American, 35.2 percent white, 15.1 percent Hispanic, and 10.9 percent Asian.³⁰⁸ The district, which covers 6.5 square miles, has approximately 6,000 students, attending twelve K–8 schools, and one high school.³⁰⁹ The district invests generously in education, spending roughly \$16,000 per pupil in 2006.³¹⁰ The school system is nationally known as the first district to adopt a “controlled choice” system of student assignment—allowing school choice with guidelines for integration.³¹¹ Originally designed to balance the student population by race, the district now integrates students primarily by family income.

HISTORY OF CONTROLLED CHOICE BY RACE

In the late 1970s, with evidence that Cambridge was guilty of *de jure* segregation, the city schools faced the threat of a desegregation suit from the Massachusetts Department of Education.³¹² In order to avoid the chaos of court-ordered busing in nearby Boston, Cambridge “voluntarily” embarked on a three-year planning process that culminated in the adoption of a unique school choice desegregation plan in 1981.³¹³ The superintendent at the time had advocated a redistricting plan with some additional magnet schools, which would ensure full desegregation in 1980; but the school committee thought that if parents were given choice, they would feel invested and the desegregation scheme would have an independent educational rationale: meeting individual student needs.³¹⁴ The 1980 plan increased the number of seats in three magnet schools, but Cambridge education advisor Charles Willie asked, “Why have improved education if 70 to 80 to 90 percent of the students cannot experience it?”³¹⁵ Instead, controlled choice—in which all schools become magnet schools—was born in March 1981.

Under the 1981 controlled choice plan, all neighborhood school attendance boundaries were abolished and every family was given a chance to apply to any public school in the city, each of which had something special to offer. (Students already attending a school were grandfathered, and could remain in that school if they chose to do so.)³¹⁶ Parents selected elementary schools, ranking

them in order of preference, from one to three.³¹⁷ Initially, choices were mailed in and assignments were made on a first come, first served basis, with a preference for siblings, those who walked to school, and those with bilingual needs. Subsequently, a computerized lottery was instituted in which all students are assigned a random number, with additional weights given for preferred categories. The “controlled” element of choice for many years involved consideration of racial balance: once a school filled up with members of a certain racial group—within a plus or minus five percentage point range of the district-wide total (expanded to a plus or minus ten percentage point range in the mid-1990s)—students of that ethnic group would not be admitted to the school.³¹⁸

Under controlled choice, a single officer makes the decisions, insulated from political influence. Appeals can be made, but are successful only when assignment presents a particular hardship (less than 1 percent of the time).³¹⁹ In order to help ensure that choices are informed, Cambridge established a Parent Information Center and implemented an aggressive outreach program, in which officials visit low-income day care centers to educate parents about the choice process.³²⁰ The entire school choice and assignment process begins early so that parents will know their placements before deadlines for private school deposits pass.³²¹ By the mid-1990s, there were several distinctive options available: an Amigos program (instruction offered in English and Spanish), a computer program, an open school, and an alternative school, among others.³²²

In theory, a key component of the plan is to take affirmative steps to beef up the “underchosen” schools—what Cambridge calls the “focus schools.”³²³ Willie, one of the architects of the Cambridge controlled choice plan, explains the idea: “the choice data is information, and, therefore, a school board is obligated to fix up the least chosen schools.”³²⁴ It is supposed to be a self-correcting mechanism, like the NFL draft of college football players: the lowest achieving teams get the first draft picks.³²⁵ The data on choice also gives administrators an objective rationale for holding underperforming principals accountable.³²⁶ In practice, however, superintendents over the years did not take the hard steps of reconstituting underchosen schools; choice was not an automatically self-correcting process in which unpopular schools were upgraded.³²⁷

Despite the flaws, Cambridge’s race-based controlled choice plan was extremely successful in reconciling choice and integration. Typically, 90 percent of families received one of their top three choices, with at least three-quarters receiving their very first choice.³²⁸ At the same time, the schools generally met their racial desegregation targets: where in 1978, ten schools were racially identifiable, after controlled choice was implemented, only one remained racially identifiable.³²⁹ By 1986, twelve of thirteen schools were within 5–6 percent of the district-wide racial makeup.³³⁰ In 1996–97, when 42 percent of elementary students were white, all fifteen elementary schools remained within plus or minus ten percentage points of that range.³³¹ By comparison, in 1978, prior to controlled choice, schools varied from 37 percent white at Roberts to 93 percent white at Kennedy.³³² Research found that if everyone in Cambridge chose their neighborhood school, only one school of fifteen would be racially and socioeconomically balanced.³³³

The fact that so many Cambridge families received their first choice—while the system also achieves racial integration—was made possible by two dynamics. First, the majority of families have chosen schools other than the one closest to them; they are moving beyond neighborhood ethnic enclaves and often choosing alternatives. In the 1989–90 school year, for example, one researcher

found 63 percent chose schools outside their neighborhood.³³⁴ The same was true a decade later.³³⁵ Second, the choices did not break down neatly along racial lines (with minority families trending toward certain schools and white families trending toward others). Researcher Norma Tan found there was a 0.90 correlation between the preferences of white and black families.³³⁶ Professor Charles Glenn notes that the choices of black and white parents have been “remarkably similar” with the popularity of various schools being “almost identical” between black and white.³³⁷

While Boston saw massive white flight during desegregation, Cambridge saw the opposite. The first four years of controlled choice saw a 32 percent *increase* in the number of new white students, as significant numbers of students were drawn back into the public school system.³³⁸ The percentage choosing public schools increased from 79 percent in 1980 to 88 percent in 1985.³³⁹ Among kindergartners, the percentage attending public schools rose from 78 percent in 1978 to 89 percent in 1987.³⁴⁰ What has made Cambridge’s success in attracting public school students even more remarkable is the wide range of private school options available. Cambridge is the only city in Massachusetts which has more private schools than public schools.³⁴¹ In fact, during the 1950s and 1960s, more than half of Cambridge students attended private and parochial schools.³⁴² Predictions to the contrary, houses in the districts which previously had a lock on the “best” neighborhood schools—Peabody and Aggasiz—did not see a decline in property values.³⁴³

MOVING TOWARD ECONOMIC BALANCE

Cambridge found, however, that racial balance did not automatically yield economic balance. Where all fifteen elementary schools were within plus or minus ten percentage points of the white/nonwhite ratio in 1996–97, only four of fifteen (27 percent) were within a similar plus or minus ten percentage point range of the district-wide low income rate (35 percent to 55 percent subsidized lunch around the 45 percent average).³⁴⁴ In 1996, some schools had 80 percent subsidized lunch populations, while others had 20 percent.³⁴⁵ In 2001, the range varied from 19 percent to 79 percent low income, and only three schools fell within plus or minus ten percentage points of the district-wide free and reduced lunch average.³⁴⁶

The schools superintendent in the mid-1990s, Mary Lou McGrath, noted that Cambridge had a strong middle-class minority population, including Asian and black professors from MIT or Harvard, whose kids were “very different than the kids from the housing project.”³⁴⁷ And many of Cambridge’s white students, particularly from the Portuguese community, were poor. Harrington Elementary was in the top third for white population and the top third for poverty, while Graham and Parks was in the top half for affluent, yet a majority were students of color.³⁴⁸ While the racial range in the district was 44.9 percent to 67.9 percent students of color, the subsidized lunch range was much larger: from 18.9 percent to 83.3 percent.³⁴⁹

In 1996, Cambridge began considering a plan to add socioeconomic status as an independent factor in the controlled choice assignment scheme in order to promote greater academic achievement.³⁵⁰ In proposing the change, McGrath drew upon her own previous experience teaching the second grade at Peabody School, an economically diverse school in Cambridge. The kids were from families of university professors, fireman, police officers, custodians, and day care providers working in the homes of professors.³⁵¹ The advantaged children would talk about touring “the Civil War battlefields” or their time in Japan; “they could tell you

everything about it.”³⁵² She recalled, “At the end of the year, some kids talked about going to Paris, while others planned to spend the summer on the playground. That constant mix enriched kids’ lives.”³⁵³

The primary benefit was to the poor kids, who had new worlds opened up to them, McGrath said. But the wealthier kids benefited too, she said. The advantaged children would learn from the working class kids, about extended families, and what it was like having a grandmother live with you. “They would share unbelievable things.”³⁵⁴ McGrath said the mix in her second grade class did not slow down the advantaged children, but “raised the whole level of achievement in the classroom. . . . It was amazing.”³⁵⁵

In addition, McGrath said, all students benefited from the economic mix because of the presence of middle-class parents who were much more likely to monitor what was going on in the school.³⁵⁶ As a beginning teacher, McGrath sent home worksheets, and if a working-class child received a grade of 100, the parents were happy, “and put it up on the refrigerator.” But the middle-class parents whose child received a grade of 100 for two days in a row would go to her and ask, “Why is he doing another whole page of 20 problems. He already knows how to do it. . . . Now let’s go on.”³⁵⁷ “Every parent wants their kid to do well,” she said, but middle-class parents were more likely to question, and to have their children ask: “Do I need to do 100 long division problems? . . . After I’ve done the first 10 and I know how to do them, why do I keep doing them?”³⁵⁸ The middle-class parents also had the knowledge to work the system, McGrath said.³⁵⁹ Alice Wolf, a state representative and former Cambridge school board member, explains that “In the schools that are predominantly occupied by middle class or upper class kids, there is a very active parent body that has the time to go out and fuss about the quality. . . . They are pushier. They fuss at the principal more.”³⁶⁰

Leonard Solo, then the principal of the Graham and Parks elementary school in Cambridge, was another strong advocate of the economic integration proposal. He pointed to the importance of peer influences. In economically mixed schools, he said, middle-class children set “a tone” that “you have to work hard and you have to study.”³⁶¹ Middle-class parental involvement also set a tone, Solo says. Working-class parents see middle class parents volunteering and become more involved themselves. By contrast, in purely working class schools, principals and staff tended to report a lack of parental involvement in the school.³⁶² Likewise, Solo said, high-poverty schools present such tremendous challenges that teachers and principals “burn out like crazy.”³⁶³ For all these reasons, Solo said, all but one of the principals in Cambridge supported socioeconomic balance.³⁶⁴

Cambridge administrators were also troubled by the difficulty of raising achievement in the city’s racially mixed but high-poverty and predominantly working-class schools. Districts can try to pour in extra resources or put special programs in high-poverty schools, administrator Barbara Black said, but “one of the things that we have discovered in some other initiatives that we do is that the burden to a school of having entirely high-need students is almost insurmountable.”³⁶⁵ Analyzing data on proficiency on the Stanford 9 test at various schools in Cambridge, Black found that both low-income and middle-class children generally performed worst in high-poverty schools.³⁶⁶

While Cambridge’s racial desegregation plan certainly brought the positive social benefits associated with racial diversity, providing integration by race—but not by socioeconomic status—

did not appear to raise academic achievement. In 2001, Gary Orfield, then a professor at Harvard, told former *New York Times* reporter Edward Fiske that racial school integration in Cambridge “has had a big effect on people’s lives,” but that “integration has not done much to improve student achievement.”³⁶⁷ In order to address the achievement gap, some urged an increased focus on economic integration.³⁶⁸

The idea of socioeconomic integration was batted around in the late 1990s, but with McGrath set to retire, it died in committee, and it fell to her successor, Bobbie D’Alessandro, to revive the plan after McGrath’s retirement in 1997.³⁶⁹ Legal developments further spurred the district’s consideration of socioeconomic status. In November 1998, the First Circuit Court of Appeals, ruling in a case involving Boston Latin School, *Wessmann v. Gittens*, struck down the use of racial preferences in admissions.³⁷⁰ In July 1999, Boston ended its use of race-based controlled choice under pressure from a new lawsuit. And legal counsel advised the Cambridge school committee that its race based assignment policy might well be struck down by the courts.³⁷¹

In November 2001, Cambridge officials, citing “the growing body research that shows that high concentrations of students of poverty in a school may have a negative impact on achievement of students of poverty within that school,” urged that socioeconomic status be the primarily factor in integrating schools.³⁷² In December 2001, the Cambridge school committee voted to amend its public school choice program to require that all public schools fall within a plus or minus fifteen percentage point range of the district-wide percentage of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch.³⁷³ The board also put in a mechanism to continue weighting race as a backup, should socioeconomic diversity not produce sufficient racial diversity.³⁷⁴ The vote was unanimous—six to zero.³⁷⁵ Current students would continue attending the school they had been assigned to under the old race-based system, but beginning in the 2002–03 school year, kindergartners each year would be assigned under the new socioeconomic plan.

EFFECTS OF THE SOCIOECONOMIC INTEGRATION PLAN

At the time of the plan’s adoption, some critics feared that a socioeconomic integration model would “drive middle-class families out of the system and further increase the percentage of poor children attending our schools.”³⁷⁶ In fact, however, the percentage of students receiving free and reduced price lunch, which stood at 48 percent in 2000–01, prior to adoption of the socioeconomic plan, remained essentially stable (47.4 percent) in 2005–06.³⁷⁷

In the 2005–06 school year, by national standards, the Cambridge schools were remarkably integrated by socioeconomic status. Ten of Cambridge’s twelve K–8 schools (83 percent) fall within plus or minus fifteen percentage points of the district average of free and reduced price lunch eligibility.³⁷⁸ At the same time, the socioeconomic controlled choice plan managed to provide the vast majority of students with one of their first three choices of schools. In the 2005–06 school year, in first cycle of kindergarten placements, 83 percent received their first choice school and another 5 percent received their second or third choice.³⁷⁹

Under the plan, race remains a potential factor in student assignment for schools in which race-neutral assignments would result in school segregation.³⁸⁰ In the four years since it was enacted, however, the socioeconomic diversity requirement has by itself led generally to racially diverse

schools, given the strong association between race and socioeconomic status among the school district's student population. In the 2005–06 lottery for kindergartners, 74 percent of African American students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, compared with 56 percent of Hispanic students, 37 percent of Asian students, and 20 percent of white students. Michael Alves of Enroll Edu, which administers the Cambridge controlled choice kindergarten assignment lottery, notes: “Although Cambridge retains race as a potential factor in its computerized assignment algorithm, it appears that to date the ‘additional weight’ provided to the randomly assigned applicants from an underrepresented racial group has not been a determinative factor in the assignment of any kindergarten students. In future years, race may prove to be determinative, but so far socioeconomic guidelines have produced racial diversity by themselves and no student has been denied a spot because of race.”³⁸¹ Under the socioeconomic guidelines, the vast majority of schools are racially integrated by the plus or minus fifteen percentage point guideline. Looking at the four major racial groups—African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and whites—across the twelve K–8 schools, forty-two of forty-eight cells (87.5 percent) fall within the desired range.³⁸²

Examining effects on achievement is difficult in part because the plan is phased in one grade at a time, so its full impact will take time to be felt as additional kindergarten cohorts are added. The district also has a new superintendent, Thomas Fowler-Finn, who has implemented a number of reforms that may affect school performance. In addition, because Cambridge's students are almost twice as likely to be low income as Massachusetts students generally (in 2005–06, 47.4 percent of Cambridge students received free or reduced price lunch, compared with 28.2 percent of students statewide), simple comparisons of Cambridge against the state are misleading.³⁸³

With those caveats in mind, the early data suggest that Cambridge's socioeconomic integration plan is working well. The plan was first implemented for incoming kindergartners in the 2002–03 school year. These kindergartners reached third grade in 2005–06 and will reach the eighth grade in 2010–11. Currently, there is one year of data publicly available on the cohort of students whose school grade was first integrated by socioeconomic status: the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) for Grade 3 Reading in the 2005–06 school year. Researcher Michael Alves examined Massachusetts Department of Education data and found that low-income third graders in Cambridge's economically desegregated schools performed better than low-income third graders statewide, and Cambridge's middle-class third graders performed about the same. On the state's MCAS Composite Performance Index (CPI), low-income Cambridge third graders had a 75.8, compared with a 71.3 for low-income third graders statewide. Likewise, only 10 percent of low-income Cambridge third graders failed the test, compared with 17 percent of low-income third grade students statewide. Meanwhile, there is no evidence that the middle-class students in Cambridge were in any way pulled down academically by the system's socioeconomic integration program. Their CPI was 88.6, roughly comparable to the state score for middle-class students of 88.8. Moreover, in examining how Cambridge compared with fifteen major urban Massachusetts districts, Alves found that Cambridge had the second highest CPI score in the state for both middle-class and low-income students.³⁸⁴

Cambridge, with its longstanding commitment to integration over the years, by race and class, produces a high school class in which 98.5 percent of students pass the state school exit exams

and 92 percent of those graduating reported going for further education—a two or four year college, university, or technical school.³⁸⁵

III. ADDITIONAL DISTRICTS PURSUING SOCIOECONOMIC SCHOOL INTEGRATION

BERKELEY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA

Berkeley, best known as the seat of the University of California at Berkeley, is home to wealthy residents in the hills and lower-income people in the flats. In 2005–06, Berkeley Unified enrolled 9,076 students, of whom 40 percent were enrolled in free/reduced lunch program. The student population was 30.7 percent black, 29.3 percent white, 16.8 percent Hispanic, 6.7 percent Asian, 0.7 percent Filipino, 0.2 percent Pacific Islander, 0.2 percent American Indian/Alaska Native, and 15.3 percent multiple race (or gave no response).³⁸⁶ Berkeley has twelve elementary schools, three middle schools, and two high schools.³⁸⁷

In 1968, Berkeley initiated a voluntary racial integration plan, elements of which remain in effect today. But in 1996, after passage of Proposition 209 in California barring the use of racial preferences, legal pressure mounted to consider race-neutral alternatives to achieving racial diversity. In February 2004, Superintendent Michele Lawrence raised an additional concern about a race-only plan. She found that some of Berkeley’s schools were racially integrated but economically segregated, and that those high-poverty schools were below par academically.³⁸⁸

Lawrence proposed a system of student assigned at the elementary-school level based on parental income, education, and race/ethnicity. Under the plan, which was approved by the board and was first implemented in the 2004–05 school year, parents rank school preferences among a variety of options and those preferences are honored with an eye to also creating diverse schools, within ten percentage points, plus or minus, of the socioeconomic and racial diversity of the broader district. Rather than basing decisions on the income, race, and education of individual families, the district looks at the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of the small geographic “planning areas” in which a student resides. (There are 445 planning areas within the district.)³⁸⁹

Because the economic element of the socioeconomic and racial integration plan was first implemented for kindergartners in 2004–05, it is difficult to know yet what the effects on academic achievement will be. It is already clear, however, that the plan has successfully reconciled integration and choice. In the 2005–06 school year, 73 percent (eight of eleven) elementary schools were within plus or minus fifteen percentage points of the district average of 40 percent subsidized lunch, and the highest concentration of poverty was 61.2 percent.³⁹⁰ As the same time, during the 2005–06 school year, 71 percent of parents received their first choice of school, 17 percent received their second choice, and 10 percent received their third choice.³⁹¹

BRANDYWINE PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT, DELAWARE

Brandywine was one of four districts created as part of an effort to desegregate schools in the city of Wilmington and the surrounding suburbs. In 2006, it had 10,573 students, 35.6 percent of whom were economically disadvantaged. The districts student body is 53.5 percent white, 39.4 percent

black, 3.2 percent Hispanic, 3.7 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.2 percent American Indian/Alaska Native.³⁹² The district has seventeen schools—eleven elementary, three middle, and three high schools.³⁹³

After the school district was released from court-ordered desegregation, it adopted a plan in 1997 to use racial factors in student assignment on a voluntary basis. In 2000, however, the Delaware State legislature passed the Neighborhood Schools Act, mandating neighborhood school assignments and prohibiting student assignment based on race. Brandywine responded by proposing to the state board, in November 2001, that the school district be allowed to use a flexible student assignment plan which would keep all schools between 16 percent and 47 percent low income, as opposed to a neighborhood assignment plan which would have increased ranges from 6 percent to 73 percent low income. The district cited extensive research that students would have suffered under the neighborhood school plan because of elevated levels of concentrated poverty. In March 2002, the Delaware State Board of Education approved Brandywine’s non-neighborhood assignment plan as a justified exception to a state law generally favoring neighborhood schools.³⁹⁴

To this day, most Brandywine schools fall within a plus or minus fifteen percentage point range of the district average for free and reduced price lunch. The ACLU, in an *amicus* brief on the Seattle and Louisville cases, noted that Brandywine’s fairly aggressive system-wide socioeconomic integration plans was far more successful in promoting racial integration as a byproduct than less aggressive programs elsewhere.³⁹⁵ Brandywine’s overall level of poverty is comparable to Delaware’s statewide average, and its achievement levels vary from grade to grade compared to the state, with generally stronger scores the longer students are in school. While reading proficiency is generally below the state level in the early grades, in tenth grade, Brandywine students are in the seventy-first percentile. In math, likewise, Brandywine students are generally weaker in the early grades, but are between the fiftieth and seventy-third percentile statewide in later grades.³⁹⁶ In 2005–06, the vast majority of Brandywine schools met or exceeded the Adequate Yearly Progress standards that the state of Delaware set for low-income students.³⁹⁷

Politically, the integration plan has strong public support. A District Task Force is currently reviewing what schools need to be closed and what schools need to be renovated in order to keep up with declining enrollment. Maintaining or improving the balance of students who qualify for free or reduced was listed as a criterion for the development of potential scenarios.³⁹⁸ When addressing the reassignment of students to other schools, the task force was charged with only submitting plans that would “not increase the range of socio-economically disadvantaged students beyond the current levels.”³⁹⁹

CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT, NORTH CAROLINA

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district, which encompasses the city of Charlotte and surrounding suburban areas, has 129,011 students, 45.5 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The student body is 42.4 percent African American, 36.2 percent white, 13.6 percent Hispanic, 4.3 percent Asian, and 3.5 percent American Indian or multiracial. The system has ninety-four elementary schools, thirty-two middle schools, twenty-five high schools, and forty-nine magnet schools.⁴⁰⁰

As a remedy to longstanding racial segregation of the schools, Charlotte, beginning in 1969, was ordered to desegregate its schools through busing to achieve racial balance between the district,

which was then 40 percent black and 60 percent white (and other) population. The program was successful in raising academic achievement and was widely lauded as a national model.⁴⁰¹

In 2001, the district was declared unitary, and the Charlotte Board of Education voted to drop its longstanding racial desegregation plan and implement a public school choice plan. The choice plan allowed parents to rank preferences among schools, and gave special consideration to students who are eligible for free and reduced price lunch and currently attend schools whose free and reduced lunch numbers are thirty percentage points above the district average. Priority was also given to low-income students whose choice to transfer “would enhance the free and reduced lunch status but not create a concentration of free-reduced lunch status above 50 percent in the receiving school.” Beginning in 2004–05, a priority was also given where the student reads below grade level and the home school performs ten percentage points below the district average for reading. The goal was to ensure that “schools don’t have a concentration of low-income students or students who perform below grade level.”⁴⁰²

The plan was deeply flawed, however. It provided a guarantee of admissions to a neighborhood school, and low-income students were provided choice to higher performing schools only if seats were available.⁴⁰³ This unaggressive program was unsuccessful in creating either socioeconomic integration or racial integration.⁴⁰⁴ The evidence clearly shows that those low-income students in Charlotte who are given a chance to attend economically mixed schools perform better than those who remain stuck in high-poverty schools. In the 2002–03 school year, Roslyn Arlin Michelson of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte notes, 60 percent of low-income elementary school students in high-poverty schools passed North Carolina End of Grade exams, compared with 69 percent of low income elementary students in low poverty schools. Among low-income middle school students, those in low-poverty schools outperformed those in high-poverty schools by fourteen percentage points (64 percent passing versus 50 percent) and among low-income high school students, the advantage of attending a low-poverty schools was thirteen percentage points (34 percent passing versus 21 percent).⁴⁰⁵ Had Charlotte adopted a much more aggressive socioeconomic plan, with strong system-wide goals akin to Wake County’s model, the academic performance, and the racial integration, of the system would likely have been far better.

MANATEE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT, FLORIDA

Manatee County School District, located along the Gulf of Mexico, just south of Tampa Bay, has an enrollment of 42,353 students, of whom 43.5 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. The district’s student body is 60 percent white, 20.2 percent Hispanic, 15.5 percent African American, and 4.3 percent other. Students are educated in thirty-four elementary schools, ten middle schools, and seven high schools.⁴⁰⁶

As part of a voluntary desegregation plan, Manatee adopted a guideline to integrate the schools by socioeconomic status, both through the redrawing of school district boundaries and through public school choice and magnet schools.⁴⁰⁷ In implementing its socioeconomic balance policy in 2002, the board ran into a political buzzsaw when it sought to reassign some students from a high-performing school (designated as an “A” school by Florida) into a failing school (designated as an “F” school).⁴⁰⁸

More politically palatable has been Manatee’s effort to promoting socioeconomic diversity through public school choice. Under the school choice plan, students apply to school and are admitted with consideration to whether the placement would help move toward the district’s “goal

of maintaining a student population at every district school which reflects the district's overall socioeconomic distribution of population."⁴⁰⁹

Manatee has been only partially successful in pursuing its goal of integrating all schools by socioeconomic status. At the elementary school level, for example, ten schools are within plus or minus fifteen percentage points of the district average, while seven schools are wealthier and fourteen are poorer. Data from the Florida Department of Education indicates, however, that to the extent the policy has been implemented, it is linked to academic success for low-income students. On the 2005–06 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), 90 percent (nine of ten) schools that were within fifteen percentage points, plus or minus, of the district average for free and reduced price lunch, made adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward Florida's achievement goals for low income students under No Child Left Behind. By contrast, only 29 percent of (four of fourteen) higher poverty schools made AYP for low income students.⁴¹⁰ These results suggest that applying Manatee's important goal of socioeconomic balance to more schools in the district would likely have a positive effect on academic achievement.

MCKINNEY INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, TEXAS

The McKinney Independent School District in suburban Dallas educates about 20,000 students, 24 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged. The district's student population is 64 percent white, 21 percent Hispanic, 11 percent African American, and 3 percent other.⁴¹¹ The east side of the 109-square-mile district is generally more affluent than the west side, and this has divided the town over the years.⁴¹² The district has nineteen elementary, four middle, and four high schools.⁴¹³

In 1995, the McKinney school board adopted a policy that attendance zones should not be based strictly on neighborhood geographic lines, but instead should strive to create socioeconomic diversity, particularly at the middle school and high school level. The district is divided into 241 small planning units, and district lines are drawn to great socioeconomic balance between schools. Former school board member Robbie Clark explained the rationale: "What we wanted to do was to try to maintain the character of our community as one community and not an east-side, west-side situation."⁴¹⁴

McKinney's low-income students substantially perform better than low-income students statewide on Texas assessments.⁴¹⁵ In 2005, when a new high school was built, socioeconomic integration remained an important priority for the district.⁴¹⁶

There has been some opposition to longer bus rides associated with integration, but the schools superintendent, Thomas Crowe, says it is mostly from new residents who do not understand the educational rationale behind the plan. "The longer people are here, the more they like it," he says.⁴¹⁷

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

The Minneapolis Public Schools educated 36,370 students in 2006–07, of whom 66.8 percent receive free and reduced price lunch. Educated in ninety-nine different schools, the district's student body is 41.4 percent African American, 28.2 percent white, 16.4 percent Hispanic American, 9.7 percent Asian American, and 4.3 percent American Indian.⁴¹⁸

In 1995, lawyers in Minneapolis filed suit challenging *de facto* economic and racial segregation of Minneapolis schools and the surrounding suburbs as a violation of the state’s duty, recognized in *Skeen v. Minnesota*, to provide an adequate education.⁴¹⁹

Plaintiffs argued that *de facto* “racial and economic” segregation violated the state’s equal protection and education clauses and sought a remedy integrating Minneapolis schools with those in surrounding suburbs.⁴²⁰ While Minneapolis schools had been under desegregation orders since 1972, the federal decision did not reach suburban schools.⁴²¹ Likewise, while Minnesota has one of the nation’s most liberal interdistrict transfer law, jurisdictions are permitted to exclude out of district pupils for reasons of space, and students need to pay their own transportation costs.⁴²²

Minneapolis’s predominantly minority and low-income student population differed dramatically, plaintiffs noted, from the statewide student population, which was 14 percent minority and 26 percent eligible for subsidized meals.⁴²³ In suburbs of Edina and Minnetonka, the minority population was 5 percent and the free and reduced meal rate 3 percent at the time of the suit.⁴²⁴

Plaintiffs argued that a “racially and socioeconomically integrated environment” is one component of a “constitutionally adequate education.”⁴²⁵ In support of this notion, the NAACP pointed to state data showing that in 1998, “Low income students who attend suburban schools are . . . twice as likely to have high achievement levels as low income students attending school in Minneapolis.”⁴²⁶ The plaintiffs also cited extensive national data suggesting that in desegregated schools, the performance of students of color improves, the achievement gap decreases, graduation rates improve, chances of life success improve, and participation in social and economic life improves.⁴²⁷

Plaintiffs argued that race and class have independent effects, with class being the primary of the two. In the companion case of *Xiong v. State of Minnesota*, filed in 1998, plaintiffs stated in their complaint: “Concentrated poverty, as exists in parts of the City of Minneapolis, when carried into the public schools, directly results in lower student achievement, wholly without regard to consideration of race. Racial segregation, on top of socioeconomic segregation, further exacerbates these problems and worsens educational outcomes.”⁴²⁸ In April, 1998, plaintiffs publicized a document indicating that school officials knew that a plan for “community schools”—more resources for segregated schools—would not work, citing a San Francisco studying finding that disadvantaged students do better when attending middle-class schools with fewer resources than high-poverty schools with more.⁴²⁹

In March 2000, the parties settled the suit, reaching an agreement on a four-year experiment beginning in the fall of 2001 to encourage greater socioeconomic integration of schools in a number of ways. Building on the state’s interdistrict transfer law, the state agreed to make transportation available for low-income students (up to \$500 per year) to attend suburban schools. Eight suburbs agreed to set aside a total of at least 500 seats for low income city students each year. Within Minneapolis, magnet schools that were wealthier than the city average were required to set aside up to 20 percent of kindergarten seats for low income students, and up to 50 percent of seats that open up in first through fifth grades. Students attending schools with two continuous years of low performance were given a right to transfer to other public schools.⁴³⁰ The agreement came on top of an earlier commitment from the state legislature to build a K–12 Minneapolis magnet to draw from eight surrounding suburban districts, and an interdistrict school in suburban Roseville, open to students from North St. Paul and St. Paul.⁴³¹

The program, though small, has been seen as a success. The Choice Is Yours Program, which grew out of the settlement, has allowed 2,000 low income Minneapolis students to attend suburban schools over a four-year period. An evaluation report prepared for the Minnesota Department of Education by ASPEN Associates concluded that “suburban choice students made significantly greater gains in reading than the comparable non-participants,” with annual gains translating into reading scores that averaged twenty-three percentile points higher than gains of nonparticipants. The gains for math translated into a twenty-five-percentile-point advantage.⁴³²

Recently, the legislature voted to continue the program even after the four year settlement expired.⁴³³

OMAHA PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEBRASKA

The Omaha Public Schools educate 46,686 students, 53.14 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged. The student body is 44 percent white, 31.5 percent black, and 21.2 percent Hispanic, with a small number of Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native students. The district has twenty-seven elementary schools, five middle schools, and five high schools, of which seventeen are magnets.⁴³⁴

In 1975, Omaha was found to have deliberately segregated its schools and was the subject of court ordered busing. In 1999, after having been declared “unitary” (desegregated), Omaha moved to a voluntary integration plan, allowing students to choose public schools and magnet schools outside their neighborhood school, with the goal of promoting socioeconomic integration.⁴³⁵ The magnet school program provides that in cases where a magnet school is oversubscribed, a lottery is held with a weight given to “participation or non-participation in the federal lunch program.”⁴³⁶ According to school officials, the plan had a positive impact, enhancing socioeconomic integration in 67 percent of elementary schools, 58 percent of middle schools, and 71 percent of high schools. The plan also had a positive effect on racial integration in 63 percent of elementary schools, 55 percent of middle schools, and 57 percent of high schools.⁴³⁷ In 2005–06, Omaha was rated “very good” in fourth- and eleventh-grade reading, and “exemplary” in fourth-, eighth-, and eleventh-grade math.⁴³⁸

In 2005, school officials took socioeconomic integration to a higher level, and passed a resolution calling for Omaha Public Schools to incorporate schools in surrounding districts that Omaha city had annexed years earlier but remained outside the Omaha Public Schools system. The primary educational justification provided by Superintendent John Mackiel was that unification would allow greater socioeconomic integration between the relatively low-income students in Omaha and the more-affluent students in the surrounding area.⁴³⁹

In 2006, the Nebraska state legislature responded with legislation that would leave adjacent districts outside the control of Omaha Public Schools and, further, actually split the Omaha district into three separate districts, one mostly black, one mostly white, and one mostly Latino. The decision prompted national attention and outrage and a lawsuit from the NAACP.⁴⁴⁰

In response to the outcry, Nebraska educators backed an alternative bill, which passed the Nebraska state legislature in May 2007, creating a new metropolitan area “learning district” and setting a goal that all schools in the metropolitan region reflect the socioeconomic diversity of the area, with a 35 percent free and reduced price lunch population.⁴⁴¹

It remains to be seen whether the necessary incentives will be put in place to meet the goal, but the legislation itself is extraordinary in two respects. Nebraska’s law represents one of the first

times that a state legislature has adopted legislation to specifically advance the goal of socioeconomic integration. And the bill, while retaining school district lines, offers a creative way of promoting cross-district cooperation to bridge the fundamental divide between schools for haves and have nots. Omaha's is an important model to watch.

ROCHESTER CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEW YORK

Rochester City schools educate a large number of mostly low-income and minority students. In 2006–07, the school district educated 32,586 students in thirty-nine elementary and twenty secondary schools. The student population was 64 percent African American, 22 percent Hispanic, 13 percent white, and less than 1 percent Asian American. Some 83 percent of elementary schools students were economically disadvantaged.⁴⁴²

In October 2002, seeking ways to improve the public schools, the Rochester Board of Education unanimously adopted a “Parent Preference/Managed Choice” controlled choice plan which gave parents a chance to choose a public school within the district and included socioeconomic fairness guidelines to seek balance in the number of students receiving free and reduced price lunch at different schools.⁴⁴³ Because of the district's size, the district is broken into three residential zones—Northeast, Northwest, and South. Parents rank preferences within their zone and also preferences among a smaller number of citywide schools. Students are assigned a random lottery number, with a preference provided for siblings and those who contribute economic diversity to a school.⁴⁴⁴

The plan originally set aside up to 60 percent of seats in each school for those within a short distance of the school, but a group of largely white middle class parents, organized as the Concerned Citizens for City Living, pressed for change in the plan to set aside 70 percent of seats for neighborhood students. The policy now provides for the 70 percent set aside even though only 38 percent of parents selected their “home school” as their first choice school.⁴⁴⁵ Under the revised policy, 100 percent of those wishing to attend a neighborhood school has been able to do so.⁴⁴⁶

Because the plan was not adopted until the 2003–04 school year, it is difficult to know what sort of effect it has had on academic achievement. Some research suggests that it is important to have a critical mass of middle class students in a school, ideally a majority.⁴⁴⁷ This suggests districts like Rochester will ultimately be more effective if they can establish cooperative interdistrict choice programs between city and suburb. A small race-based interdistrict program already exists between Rochester and six surrounding suburbs, known as the Urban-Suburban Interdistrict Transfer Program.⁴⁴⁸ In light of the Supreme Court's ruling, the program could be saved by shifting the emphasis to socioeconomic status. In any event, it could be greatly expanded to reach the size of programs in other cities, such as St. Louis.⁴⁴⁹

SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA

The San Francisco Unified School District has a very diverse student body of 55,000, which is 31.9 percent Chinese, 22.4 percent Latino, 13.0 percent African American, and 9.3 percent white. Districtwide, 57.0 percent receive free and reduced price lunch.⁴⁵⁰ The district spans forty-seven square miles and has roughly 119 schools.⁴⁵¹ For years, San Francisco schools were segregated, and as a remedy, under a 1983 consent decree, no school was to have more than 45 percent of students from one of any nine racial groups.⁴⁵² Subsequently, Chinese American parents, upset that their

children were being limited at elite public schools, sued, and under a settlement, race was dropped as a factor in student assignment.

In April, 2001, the San Francisco School Board adopted a new student assignment plan, which replaced a racial desegregation scheme with one that seeks socioeconomic diversity. Under the new plan, the district began using a seven-part definition, including socioeconomic status (has the student participated in free/reduced lunch, Calworks, or public housing?); academic achievement (has the student scored below the thirtieth percentile on Stanford 9?); mothers educational background (has she had post-high school education?); student's language status (limited English or not proficient?); quality of student's prior school (lowest ranking in California Academic Performance Index?); student's home language (other than English?); and residence in different geographic area.⁴⁵³

Like Cambridge, San Francisco has a 100 percent choice system, and students apply to schools at the beginning of elementary, middle, and high school, rather than being assigned based on the neighborhood in which they live. In the 2004–05 school year, the district was fairly successful in balancing schools by socioeconomic status: 75 percent of schools (89 of 118) were within plus or minus twenty percentage points of the district free and reduced price lunch average (of 53.4 percent). At the same time, 81 percent of families get receive one of their choices of schools, 63 percent their first choice.⁴⁵⁴ San Francisco has also instituted a weighted student formula, which provides greater funding to low-income students. Anecdotal evidence suggests this formula may encourage middle-class schools to recruit low-income students.⁴⁵⁵

Economic diversity, however, has not produces as much racial diversity as hoped. The number of schools that are considered segregated (more than 60 percent of students are of one race in one or more grade levels) rose from thirty in 2001–02 to forty-five in 2004–05.⁴⁵⁶ In a 2006 study, Josh Hillman of the Institute for Public Policy Research, noted that many San Francisco families choose the neighborhood school, which tends to reinforce residential segregation by race. Significantly, the “diversity index” is triggered only when a school is over-chosen, so in many of the high poverty and high minority schools located in poor areas in the city, the economic integration program has no effect.⁴⁵⁷ The socioeconomic policy has no overall cap on the number of low-income or middle-class students in a given school, in contrast to the old racial integration policy's 45 percent cap on students from any one racial or ethnic group.⁴⁵⁸

Still, academic achievement under economic school integration has been strong. Although San Francisco has a higher proportion of low-income students (57.0 percent) than the state of California generally (50.1 percent), San Francisco students consistently outperform California students statewide.⁴⁵⁹ In 2006, San Francisco students outperformed students in the state of California on the California Achievement Test, Sixth Edition, and the California Standards Test, in all areas and grade levels.⁴⁶⁰ The district also has consistently been the top performing urban district in the state.⁴⁶¹

IV. FUTURE PROSPECTS

The forty communities now using socioeconomic status might be joined over time by many additional districts. Some districts are already actively examining socioeconomic school integration, jurisdictions such as Burlington, Vermont,⁴⁶² and Pasadena, California.⁴⁶³ In addition, many districts now using race in student assignment may decide to shift to emphasizing socioeconomic status in light of the Supreme Court's rulings in the Seattle and Louisville cases.

It is estimated that hundreds of school districts now use race in student assignment.⁴⁶⁴ Some of these districts use race as part of a court ordered desegregation strategy, and their plans will be unaffected by the Court's rulings. But many districts have adopted race-conscious student assignment plans voluntarily, and these are the districts which may wish to look for a viable race-neutral alternative.

Voluntary racial school integration plans are in effect not only in Jefferson County (Louisville), and Seattle (the subjects of the litigation), but such districts as Lee County (Ft. Meyers) Florida, as well as twenty Massachusetts districts (Lynn, Brockton, and others).⁴⁶⁵ Likewise, interdistrict race-conscious integration programs exist in St. Louis,⁴⁶⁶ Hartford,⁴⁶⁷ Boston,⁴⁶⁸ Rochester,⁴⁶⁹ and elsewhere. They may wish to follow the interdistrict example in Minneapolis, which uses socioeconomic status.

Already, the idea of using socioeconomic status has been floated in a number of these communities, including Jefferson County;⁴⁷⁰ Lee County;⁴⁷¹ Lynn;⁴⁷² and Seattle.⁴⁷³ In Louisville, for example, in 1993, the superintendent Stephen Daeschner said the uneven distribution of poor children "bothers me more than anything. . . . That question is as powerful as the (racial) integration one in my mind." The principal at Roosevelt Perry Elementary, which was racially integrated but 99 percent low income, urged a plan to "equalize schools by socioeconomic status as well as race."⁴⁷⁴ A few years later, a poll of Louisville teachers found that educationally they were more concerned about income integration than racial integration.⁴⁷⁵ An April 2002 analysis by the Jefferson County school district found that low-income students in middle-class schools performed better than low-income students in high-poverty schools.⁴⁷⁶ Indeed, in his 2004 decision upholding the use of race, Judge John Heyburn II noted the "educational benefits" of racial integration stemmed in part from its relationship to poverty: "concentrations of poverty which may arise in neighborhood schools are much more likely to adversely affect black students than whites."⁴⁷⁷

Making American schools integrated is tough work, requiring strong political leadership and a sustained commitment to the promise of equal opportunity. The U.S. Supreme Court's decisions in the Louisville and Seattle cases present new obstacles, but across the country, school districts are not giving up, and indeed, are coming up with an alternative that can be an even more powerful engine for social mobility.

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NOTES

1. *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School Dist. No. 1*, Slip Opinion (Kennedy, J., concurring), p. 10.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 8; and *ibid.*, pp. 49–52 (Breyer, J., dissenting).
3. *Comfort v. Lynn School Committee*, 418 F.3d 1, 29 (2005) (Boudin, C.J., concurring).
4. For an argument that districts should be allowed to use race and class in K–12 student assignment, see Richard D. Kahlenberg, “A New Way on School Integration,” The Century Foundation, November 2006, available online at <http://www.tcf.org/publications/education/schoolintegration.pdf>.
5. Application for Federal Education Assistance, Baltimore County Public Schools, March 15, 2004, Table 5 (for two middle schools, “If necessary, BCPS may use socio-economic status as a factor in the lottery process in order to have diverse enrollments in its magnet programs”) and “Balto. Co. Schools Get Grant for Magnet Sites,” *Baltimore Sun*, August 13, 2004.
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