



FACTS SCHOOL INTEGRATION

# The Benefits of Socioeconomically and Racially Integrated Schools and Classrooms

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

Research shows that racial and socioeconomic diversity in the classroom can provide students with a range of cognitive and social benefits. And school policies around the country are beginning to catch up. Today, over 4 million students in America are enrolled in school districts or charter schools with socioeconomic integration policies—a number that has more than doubled since 2007.

Here's why the growing momentum in favor of diversity in schools is good news for all students:

## Academic and Cognitive Benefits

On average, students in socioeconomically and racially diverse schools—regardless of a student's own economic status—have stronger academic outcomes than students in schools with concentrated poverty.

- **Students in integrated schools have higher average test scores.** On the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) given to fourth graders in math, for example, low-income students attending more affluent schools scored roughly two years of learning ahead of low-income students in high-poverty schools. Controlling carefully for students' family background, another study found that students in mixed-income schools showed 30 percent more growth in test scores over their four years in high school than peers with similar socioeconomic backgrounds in schools with concentrated poverty.

- **Students in integrated schools are more likely to enroll in college.** When comparing students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds, those students at more affluent schools are 68 percent more likely to

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enroll at a four-year college than their peers at high-poverty schools.

- **Students in integrated schools are less likely to drop out.** Dropout rates are significantly higher for students in segregated, high-poverty schools than for students in integrated schools. During the height of desegregation in the 1970s and 1980s, dropout rates decreased for minority students, with the greatest decline in dropout rates occurring in districts that had undergone the largest reductions in school segregation.

- **Integrated schools help to reduce racial achievement gaps.** In fact, the racial achievement gap in K–12 education closed more rapidly during the peak years of school desegregation in the 1970s and 1980s than it has overall in the decades that followed—when many desegregation policies were dismantled. More recently, black and Latino students had smaller achievement gaps with white students on the 2007 and 2009 NAEP when they were less likely to be stuck in high-poverty school environments. The gap in SAT scores between black and white students continues to be larger in segregated districts, and one study showed that change from complete segregation to complete integration in a district could reduce as much as one quarter of the current SAT score disparity.

- **Integrated classrooms encourage critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity.** We know that diverse classrooms, in which students learn cooperatively alongside those whose perspectives and backgrounds are different from their own, are beneficial to all students—including middle-class white students—because these environments promote creativity, motivation, deeper learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

## Civic and Social-Emotional Benefits

Racially and socioeconomically diverse schools offer students important social-emotional benefits by exposing

them to peers of different backgrounds. The increased tolerance and cross-cultural dialogue that result from these interactions are beneficial for civil society.

- **Attending a diverse school can help reduce racial bias and counter stereotypes.** Children are at risk of developing stereotypes about racial groups if they live in and are educated in racially isolated settings. By contrast, when school settings include students from multiple racial groups, students become more comfortable with people of other races, which leads to a dramatic decrease in discriminatory attitudes and prejudices.

- **Students who attend integrated schools are more likely to seek out integrated settings later in life.** Integrated schools encourage relationships and friendships across group lines. According to one study, students who attend racially diverse high schools are more likely to live in diverse neighborhoods five years after graduation.

- **Integrated classrooms can improve students' satisfaction and intellectual self-confidence.** Research on diversity at the college level shows that when students have positive experiences interacting with students of other backgrounds and view the campus racial and cultural climate as affirming, they emerge with greater confidence in their own academic abilities.

- **Learning in integrated settings can enhance students' leadership skills.** A longitudinal study of college students found that the more often first-year students were exposed to diverse educational settings, the more their leadership skills improved.

## Economic Benefits

Providing more students with integrated school environments is a cost-effective strategy for boosting student achievement and preparing students for work in a diverse global economy.

- **School integration efforts produce a high return on investment.** According to one recent estimate, reducing socioeconomic segregation in our schools by half would produce a return on investment of 3-5 times the cost of the programs.

- **Attending an integrated school can be a more effective academic intervention than receiving extra funding in a higher-poverty school.** One study of students in Montgomery County, Maryland, found that students living in public housing randomly assigned to lower-poverty neighborhoods and schools outperformed those assigned to higher-poverty neighborhoods and schools—even though the higher-poverty schools received extra funding per pupil.

- **School integration promotes more equitable access to resources.** Integrating schools can help to reduce disparities in access to well-maintained facilities, highly qualified teachers, challenging courses, and private and public funding.

- **Diverse classrooms prepare students to succeed in a global economy.** In higher education, university officials and business leaders argue that diverse college campuses and classrooms prepare students for life, work, and leadership in a more global economy by fostering leaders who are creative, collaborative, and able to navigate deftly in dynamic, multicultural environments.

Adapted from *How Racially Diverse Schools and Classrooms Can Benefit All Students* (2016) and *A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education* (2014).