



# Remedying School Segregation

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DECEMBER 12, 2016 — PAUL TRACTENBERG, ALLISON RODA, AND RYAN COUGHLAN

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More than sixty-two years after the United States Supreme Court's unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*,<sup>1</sup> the nation is still wrestling with how to integrate our schools. Indeed, recent evidence indicates the problem has been worsening.<sup>2</sup>

School districts in some southern states that had made impressive progress under federal court oversight have seen their schools re-segregate as the courts have pulled back and even called into question the legality of voluntary desegregation plans. School districts in northern and western states never were substantially affected by *Brown's* desegregation mandate because of the Supreme Court's unwillingness to make *Brown* a truly national requirement. In fact, schools in northern and midwestern states such as New York, Illinois, Michigan, and New Jersey have consistently been the most severely segregated.<sup>3</sup>

Demographic changes in the nation and in many states have made the picture more complicated, but no less bleak. As the white and black student population percentages have declined, and the Hispanic and Asian percentages have increased, the concept of diversity and the meaning of school integration have shifted. Still, the reality on the ground is that the rapidly increasing Hispanic student population has joined black and white students in their educational isolation.

We desperately need to find a way to do better at meeting *Brown's* clarion call and the demands of an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. The Morris School District in New Jersey (Morris district, or MSD) may offer such a path. Largely operating under the radar since its creation in 1971, the district has achieved impressive, if incomplete, success at attracting and maintaining a diverse student population and

This report is available online at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/remedying-school-segregation/>

offering them the educational and social benefits of integrated education. Morris may provide an effective counter-narrative to the story told in most of the rest of the nation over the years since *Brown*.

The Morris district grew out of unlikely soil, which may make its story even more compelling. It resulted from a forced merger of two school districts in largely suburban Morris County. The merger was ordered by the state commissioner of education explicitly for racial balance reasons after the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that he had the power to take such action if he deemed it educationally appropriate and necessary to satisfy the state constitutional requirements for education.

To this point, the Morris district is the only one in New Jersey, indeed in the United States, to have been birthed in that manner. Its success at achieving and maintaining a remarkable degree of student diversity in a world where homogeneity is the norm makes one wonder why. By one benchmark of diversity—how a school district’s student population compares to statewide averages—the Morris district may be the most diverse school district in New Jersey. Its 2014–15 demographic profile is 52 percent white students, 11 percent black, 32 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Asian, and 35 percent receiving free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL, that is, low-income) against a state profile of 47 percent white, 16 percent black, 26 percent Hispanic, 9 percent Asian, and 38 percent FRPL.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the districtwide numbers, the Morris district has achieved remarkable diversity at the school building level. Since the district has only one middle school and one high school, these are not where the diversity rubber meets the road. Rather, the test is the elementary school populations. There, the Morris district shines. Despite the fact that students live in relatively homogeneous, segregated neighborhoods, the elementary schools they attend defy that pattern. For example, to achieve perfect racial balance between black and white students at the elementary school level,

only about 2.6 percent would have to change their school assignments.

The Morris district still struggles with two aspects of diversity, however. First,—in common with virtually every diverse school district in the country—it is still attempting to bring meaningful diversity to every program and course within its school buildings, from higher-level Honors and Advanced Placement courses to special education classifications and rosters of disciplinary actions. Second, in common with some but hardly all diverse districts across the country, the Morris district is trying to cope with the explosive growth of Hispanic students, many of them in recent years economically disadvantaged students from Central American countries where they often failed to receive a solid educational foundation in their own language and culture. Understandably, these students tend not to score well on standardized tests, especially in their early years in MSD. This contributes substantially to the Morris district’s record of relatively poor achievement levels in three substantially overlapping student categories—Hispanic, English Language Learners (ELL), and economically disadvantaged students—as compared to its relatively strong achievement levels for white and black students.

As to both challenges, the Morris district is manifesting a remarkably can-do spirit and a palpable will to succeed.

In all these respects, the study of the Morris district reported on here is designed ultimately to extract lessons for other school districts in New Jersey and the rest of the nation. This report begins by exploring briefly the historical, political, and legal context of educational integration in New Jersey, and how that led to the creation of the Morris School District. It then analyzes and discusses the successes—and the challenges—of MSD’s integration efforts. Along the way, it contrasts the successes of MSD with two other districts in New Jersey—Plainfield and New Brunswick—that attempted integration by district merger, but failed. It concludes by

making recommendations not only for improvements in MSD’s approach, but for school districts across New Jersey and the country that are seeking to integrate their schools and classrooms.

## The New Jersey Context and the Creation of the Morris School District

Prior to the *Brown* decision in 1954, New Jersey had a decidedly mixed history regarding school segregation and broader issues of equality. Unlike the southern states, it never had a formal and generally applicable state law requiring school segregation; nonetheless, the state actually had segregated schools into the 1950s. They resulted from formal policy or less formal action of local school districts. Ironically, though, in 1850, the state legislature adopted “permissive legislation,” on petition of Morris Township, to enable it to establish a separate school district for the exclusive use of “colored children,” and the result was the opening of the segregated Spring Street school in Morristown (at the time and until 1865, Morristown was part of Morris Township).<sup>5</sup>

New Jersey also had a bizarre episode in the late 1860s in connection with ratification of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. That amendment includes the equal protection clause, which was the basis of the *Brown* decision. To become effective, the amendment had to be ratified by three-fourths of the states. New Jersey and one other state initially ratified, but then rescinded their actions. Nonetheless, they were counted as ratifying and their support was necessary to achieve the requisite three-fourths. It was not until 2003 that New Jersey formally ratified the 14th Amendment (actually revoked its 1868 action to rescind its earlier ratification),<sup>6</sup> the last state to do so.

To demonstrate that it was not “small-minded,” however, in 1881 New Jersey became one of the first states to enact a statute barring segregation in the schools,<sup>7</sup>

and the state courts strongly enforced that statute a number of times. In 1945, the legislature acted again to adopt the Law Against Discrimination.<sup>8</sup> Two years later, in 1947, New Jersey became the only state to adopt an explicit constitutional amendment barring segregation in the schools.<sup>9</sup>

Still, at the time of the *Brown* decision in 1954, some New Jersey schools, especially in the southern part of the state, were formally segregated and many others were de facto segregated.

This dichotomy has continued to characterize New Jersey’s record regarding school segregation—strong laws on the books and feeble action on the ground. Indeed, thanks to several landmark state court decisions in the 1960s and early 1970s, New Jersey is in the distinctive position of having the strongest state law in the nation barring school segregation and affirmatively requiring racial balance in the schools while it regularly is listed as having one of the country’s worst records of school segregation.

New Jersey’s state court decisions in the seventeen years following *Brown*—culminating in the 1971 state supreme court decision paving the way to the Morris School District merger, *Jenkins v. Township of Morris School District*<sup>10</sup>—are worthy of specific reference. They came during a period when federal court enforcement of *Brown* was best characterized by the oxymoronic phrase used by the U.S. Supreme Court in its 1955 follow-up decision to *Brown*—“all deliberate speed.” The enforcement was slow and limited, with the federal courts seeming to erect more obstacles to meaningful nationwide enforcement than to clear away obstacles imposed by the states.

The New Jersey courts, by contrast, acted boldly. Two decisions of the state supreme court were especially noteworthy. In 1965, the court ruled in *Booker v. Board of Education of the City of Plainfield*<sup>11</sup> that there was no meaningful state constitutional distinction between de jure and de facto segregation, that both were equally

harmful to black students and, therefore, equally offensive to the New Jersey constitution. The federal courts' repeated unwillingness to adopt that view was perhaps the main limitation on *Brown's* remedial scope.

In 1971, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled in the *Jenkins* case that the state constitution required the achievement of racial balance in the schools "wherever feasible," and that school district borders were not an impediment to that right of students and obligation of the state. As with the de jure-de facto distinction, the federal courts' unwillingness to extend desegregation remedies across district lines, absent evidence of unconstitutional discrimination by all the school districts involved, sharply limited *Brown's* reach and made it primarily a decision of regional rather than national scope.

The *Jenkins* case was brought to the New Jersey courts by eight residents of Morristown and Morris Township after they had unsuccessfully petitioned the state commissioner of education, both informally and formally, to take action to prevent the Morris Township school district from terminating its longstanding educational relationship with the Morristown school district. The petitioners' claim was that the departure of the township's predominantly white students from Morristown High School, likely coupled with the departure of other white students from Harding Township and perhaps from Morris Plains that also had sending relationships, would quickly lead to the high school becoming a predominantly black school, to the educational and social detriment of all.

The commissioner, Carl Marburger, expressed agreement with the petitioners' position, but concluded he lacked the legal authority to provide the remedies sought—either requiring Morris Township to continue sending its high school students to Morristown, or ordering the creation of a regional district, preferably K–12. The New Jersey statutes did provide a voluntary mechanism for regionalization of districts, but it

required approval by referendum of all the constituent districts, an unlikely occurrence here.

Not that the township was adamantly opposed to merger. In fact, opinion was closely divided on the subject. Remember that until 1865 Morris Township and Morristown had been a single municipality and school district, and for more than a century thereafter, township students attended Morristown High School, often without benefit of any formal legal agreement. As both the commissioner and the New Jersey Supreme Court recognized in their respective legal opinions in the *Jenkins* case, in many ways the two continued to function as a single municipality. Still, a modest majority of those who voted in an "advisory" referendum had preferred that the township build its own high school and thereby become its own K–12 district.

That prospect led to the litigation, to the landmark *Jenkins* decision, and to the merged Morris School District. It also led to opponents of merger predicting that the main result would be massive white flight from the merged district and a predominantly black Morristown High School. The failure of that prediction to materialize is at the heart of the study of the Morris district reported on here. If we can distill from the Morris district experience what enabled diversity to work there in a substantial if incomplete way, perhaps we can fashion a template that might enable other districts in New Jersey and in the rest of the country to achieve more diverse schools within their own boundaries.

Before this report proceeds to a deeper description and analysis of the Morris district, and to recommendations drawn from that effort, there are two more contextual points to address briefly. The first has to do with two other New Jersey school districts that were in the queue for a similar merger remedy, but whose turn never came. They were Plainfield and New Brunswick. Both, like Morristown, were relatively urban and diverse school districts whose high schools received predominantly white students from adjacent more suburban districts.

They, like Morristown, were confronted with the departure of those white students, and sought to obtain remedial assistance from the commissioner of education to maintain their student diversity possibly by merger with their sending districts. Unlike Morristown, however, they failed to obtain that assistance.

Why the difference in result? Certainly, there were demographic and other distinctions at play, but there was a political dimension that may have been dispositive. Carl Marburger, the commissioner who ordered the Morris merger, failed by one vote in the state senate to be confirmed for another term as commissioner, and that failure was widely attributed to his merger order. Not surprisingly, successor commissioners became wary about acting as Marburger had.

Whatever the explanation, Plainfield and New Brunswick had to go it alone, and as a result, their current demographic profiles, as compared to Morristown's, are startling. Whereas the Morris district has about 52 percent white students currently, Plainfield and New Brunswick each have less than 1 percent. They also have dramatically higher percentages of low-income students. It is unlikely we can establish a direct causal connection between the denial of merger and the degree of student segregation in those two districts, but the correlational evidence is powerful.

The second contextual point to be made about the Morris district is in the nature of a wall of honor. To the extent that the district is a success story, who are the primary authors? As with most success stories, there are many contenders. If it takes a village to raise a child, it must take at least a village to author a transformational success story such as this one.

While there are a number of worthy contenders, three people can be singled out as the main forces behind the success of the Morris district—Beatrice Jenkins, Carl Marburger, and Stephen Wiley, with the top billing going to Wiley, who passed away in October 2015 after

a long life of distinguished service to New Jersey and to the Morris School District.

Beatrice Jenkins gave her name to the legal case and is otherwise worthy of recognition. She was a longtime black resident of Morristown, one of three Morristown residents who joined with five Morris Township residents to constitute the “Morris Eight,” the petitioners in the legal case that paved the way to the Morris School District. In collaboration with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. and the Urban League, these residents lent their names and efforts to the lawsuit.

Carl Marburger was certainly one of New Jersey's most progressive and accomplished commissioners of education. He came to Trenton from Washington, D.C., where he had served on the education group of the Task Force on Poverty, the forerunner to the Office of Economic Opportunity, the federal antipoverty agency. Before that, he had been an assistant superintendent of the Detroit public schools. After Marburger's premature departure from New Jersey, he became one of three cofounders of the National Committee for Citizens in Education, where he spent fifteen years advocating for the rights of parents. Notwithstanding his progressive bona fides, Marburger agonized over what to do in connection with the Morris district. As it has on so many controversial education issues over the years, the New Jersey Supreme Court got him off the fence by its decision in the *Jenkins* case.

Finally, there was Steve Wiley. Wiley was born, raised, and public-school-educated in Morristown and Morris Township. He came by his lifelong commitment to the Morris district schools the old-fashioned way—his father, Burton, was a longtime superintendent of the district. Wiley graduated from Morristown High School in 1947. He went on to Princeton and Columbia Law School, became a successful lawyer, businessman, politician and public benefactor. He also was a nature lover, a woodworker, a gardener and a poet. As lawyer for the

Morristown school board, he was instrumental in the Jenkins case, and he founded the Morris Educational Foundation. A comment about Steve Wiley in an article celebrating his life captures the essence:

Anyone who wants to appreciate the late Steve Wiley's impact on Greater Morristown should attend Saturday's homecoming game at his alma mater, Morristown High School. . . . Today, we live and work and go to school in one of the only truly diverse communities in New Jersey. . . . Look at the football team, the cheerleaders, the band, the kids in the stands, the supervisors and coaches on the field and you will see something really beautiful and I think unique. We all play together and celebrate together and solve our problems together. We like each other. Steve Wiley did that. And I am so grateful.<sup>12</sup>

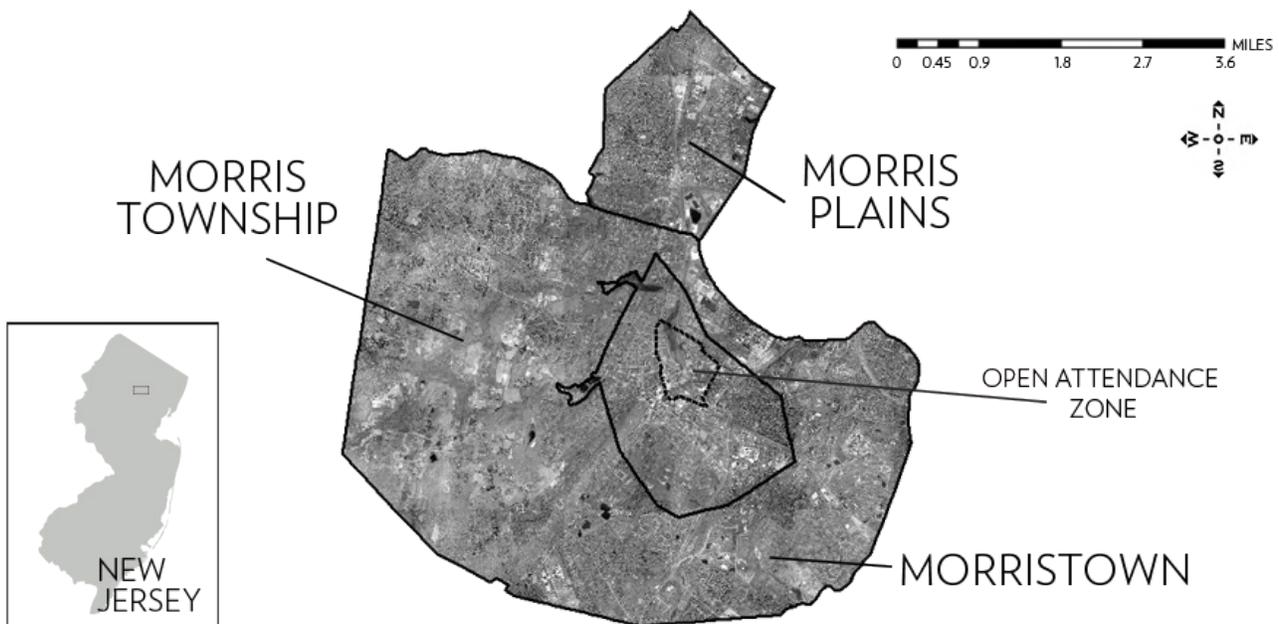
An equally fitting statement comes from Wiley himself:

Our schools teach the ABC's with distinction, but young people in Morristown High and the grade schools also learn the D's, E's and F's. By association and experience they learn about democracy and diversity, about equal opportunity and ethnic strengths, about freedom and fraternity, about the whole alphabet of America.<sup>13</sup>

## A Case Study of the Morris School District as a Remedial Model

To move beyond the unique history and status of the Morris School District (MSD) to its potential to be a remedial model for New Jersey and the rest of the

FIGURE 1. ORTHOPHOTOGRAPHY OF THE MORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEW JERSEY



Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2010), decennial census; N.J. Office of Information technology (NJOIT), office of geographic information systems (OGIS) (2012), New Jersey high resolution orthophotography, and (2015), municipal boundaries; Morris School District (2016), open enrollment boundary.

United States requires a deeper understanding of the district. This section of the report describes MSD from a quantitative perspective sketching out a demographic profile of its constituent communities and its student population, the degree to which its individual schools mirror the diversity of the district at large, and the educational outcomes of its students, both overall and by relevant subgroups.

## A Demographic Profile of the Morris School District Municipalities

The Morris School District is located in Morris County, New Jersey, and includes, as a formal matter, Morris Township and Morristown. Although adjoining Morris Plains sends its high school students to Morristown High School in MSD, it maintains its own schools for kindergarten through eighth grade. The educational relationship between Morris Plains and the Morris district is a close and longstanding one, though, so Morris Plains and its students will be included in the demographic profiles of the MSD's municipalities and schools. Henceforth, for ease of reference, Morris Plains will be treated as one of the MSD's constituent municipalities.

As shown in Figure 1, the Morris School District's location in northern New Jersey is approximately thirty miles east of New York City. Much of the district is comprised of detached suburban housing, although there are more dense areas at the core of the district in Morristown. The most dense areas of the district are located in the open attendance zone at the heart of Morristown, which is a centerpiece of the district's successful effort to diversify its elementary schools (see discussion of the student assignment policy in the Analysis and Discussion section; see Appendix B for a discussion of the quantitative methods).

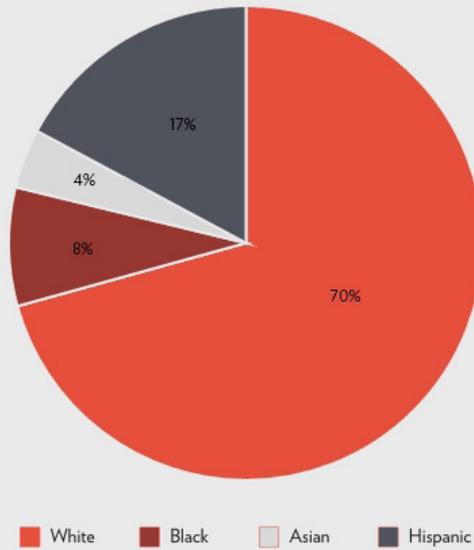
The total population of the municipalities that we include in the Morris School District is 46,764—22,549 people live in Morris Township, 18,580 people live in

Morristown, and 5,635 people live in Morris Plains. As shown in Figure 2, 70 percent of the total population of the three municipalities is white, 17 percent is Hispanic, 8 percent is black, and 4 percent is Asian. The median household income for the three municipalities is \$98,424 per year—the median household income is \$127,074 in Morris Township, \$110,167 in Morris Plains, and \$75,696 in Morristown. The child poverty rate is extremely low in both Morris Plains (1.3 percent) and Morris Township (3.9 percent); however, the child poverty rate in Morristown is a much higher 20.9 percent. As Figure 3 shows, 92 percent of the population over the age of twenty-five in the three municipalities has a high school diploma or a GED and 57 percent of the population has at least a bachelor's degree. However, only 46.3 percent of the population in Morristown holds a bachelor's degree or more.<sup>14</sup>

The interactive map shows the distribution of the population in the Morris School District municipalities by race and ethnicity. As it illustrates, there is a lower concentration of white people in Morristown than in the other two municipalities, few white residents live in the open attendance zone, and several census blocks throughout the Morris School District are exclusively white. It also shows that an overwhelming majority of the Hispanic population in the MSD municipalities lives in Morristown, and there is a particularly high concentration of Hispanic people in the open attendance zone. The map indicates that the black population is more dispersed, but that there is a high concentration of black people living in Morristown and in the open attendance zone. Finally, it illustrates that the Asian population is also dispersed throughout the MSD municipalities, but there is a very low concentration of Asian people in the open attendance zone.

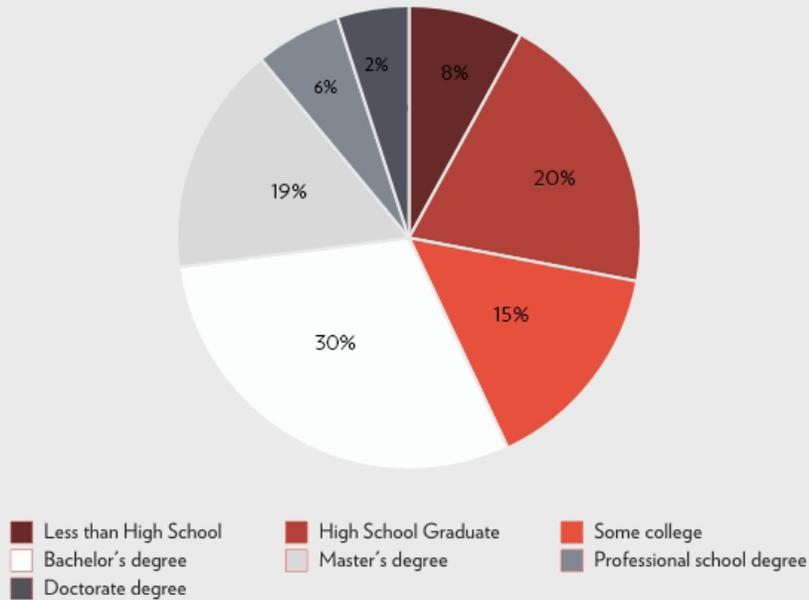
Given the correlation between home ownership and both social and economic stability, Figure 5 provides some useful insight into neighborhood variation across the school district. As seen in Figure 5, a large proportion of the population in Morris Township and Morris Plains

FIGURE 2. RACE/ETHNICITY FOR MORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT MUNICIPALITIES



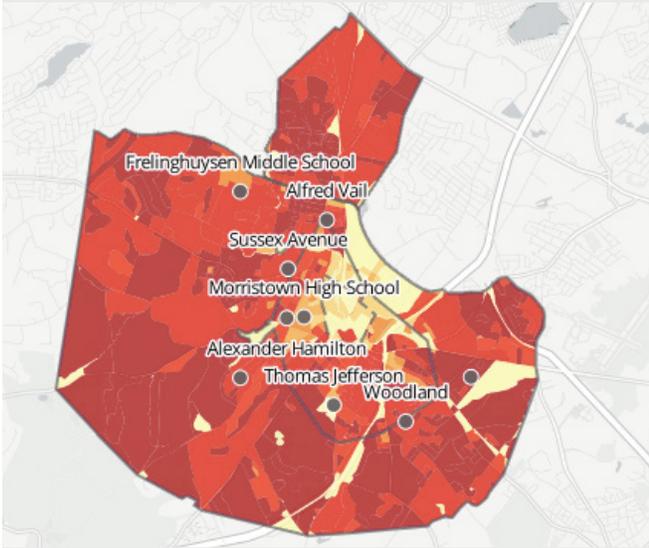
Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2014)  
American Community Survey 5-year Estimates.

FIGURE 3. EDUCATION ATTAINMENT FOR THE POPULATION OVER THE AGE OF 25 IN THE MORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT MUNICIPALITIES

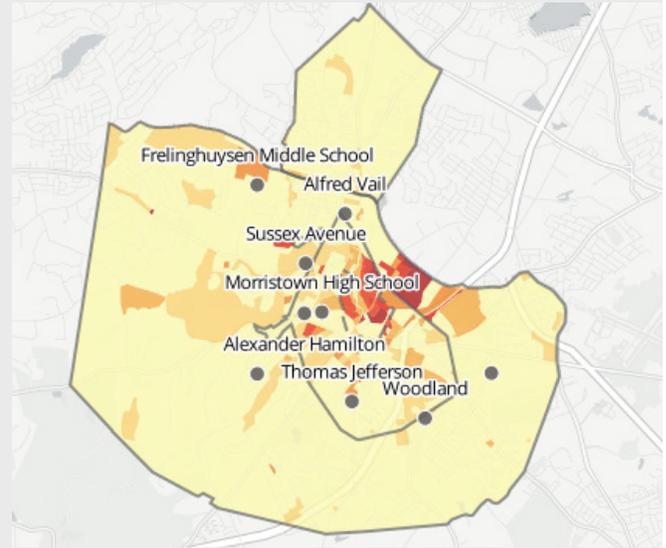


Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2014)  
American Community Survey 5-year Estimates.

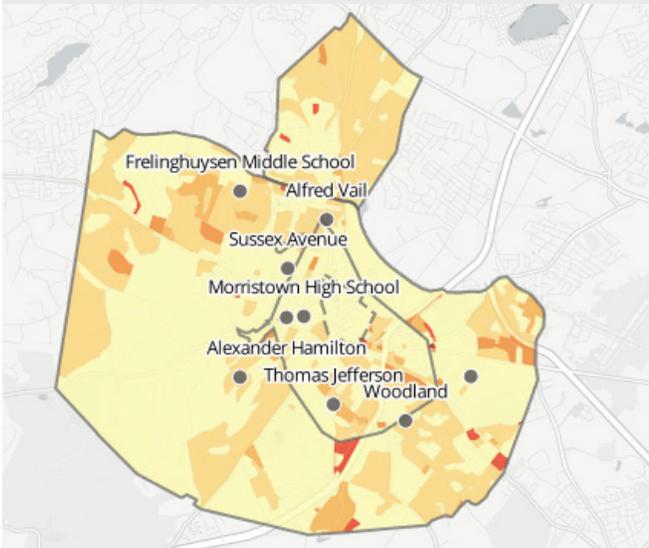
FIGURE 4. PROPORTION OF POPULATION BY RACE/ETHNICITY



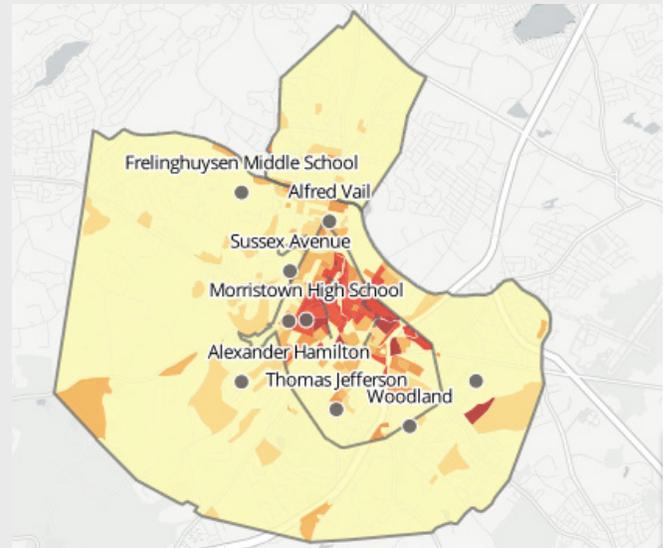
4A. WHITE



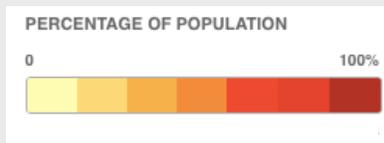
4B. BLACK



4C. HISPANIC

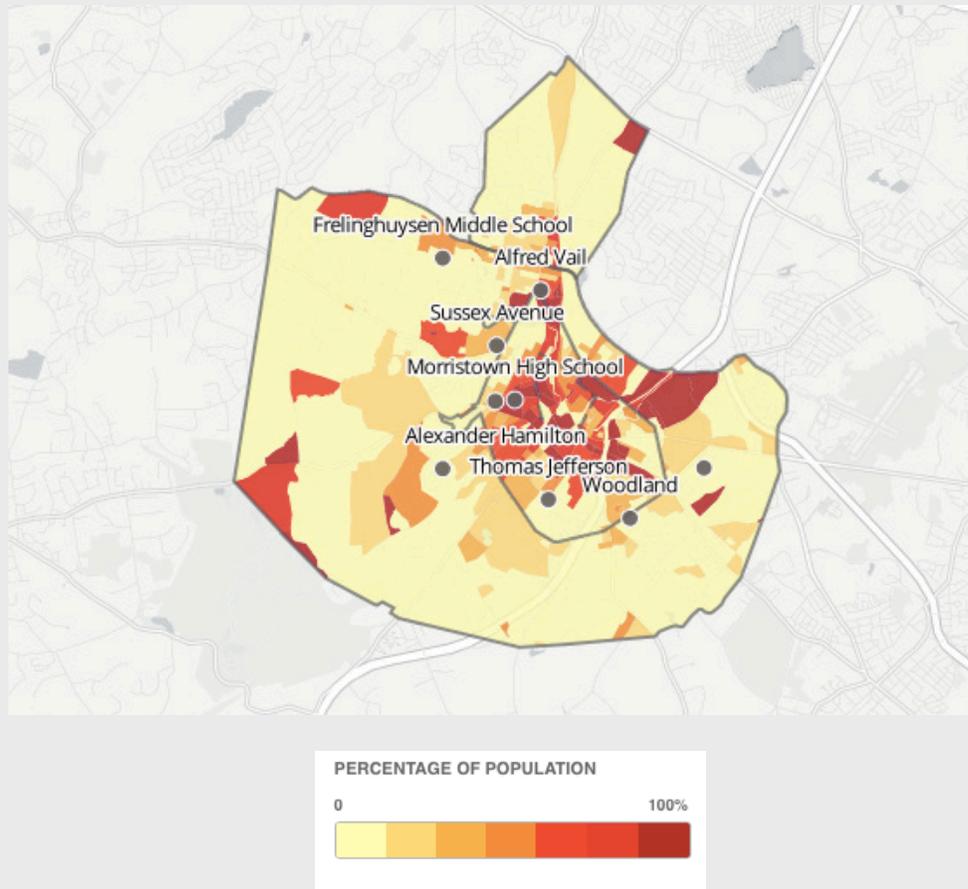


4D. ASIAN



Note: Dashed line indicates open attendance zone. Solid line indicates municipal boundaries.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2010), Decennial Census.

FIGURE 5. PROPORTION OF HOUSEHOLDS THAT RENT, BY CENSUS BLOCK



Note: Dashed line indicates open attendance zone. Solid line indicates municipal boundaries.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2010), Decennial Census.

owns the homes where they live. By contrast, a large proportion of the population in Morristown, particularly in the open attendance zone, rents their residences.

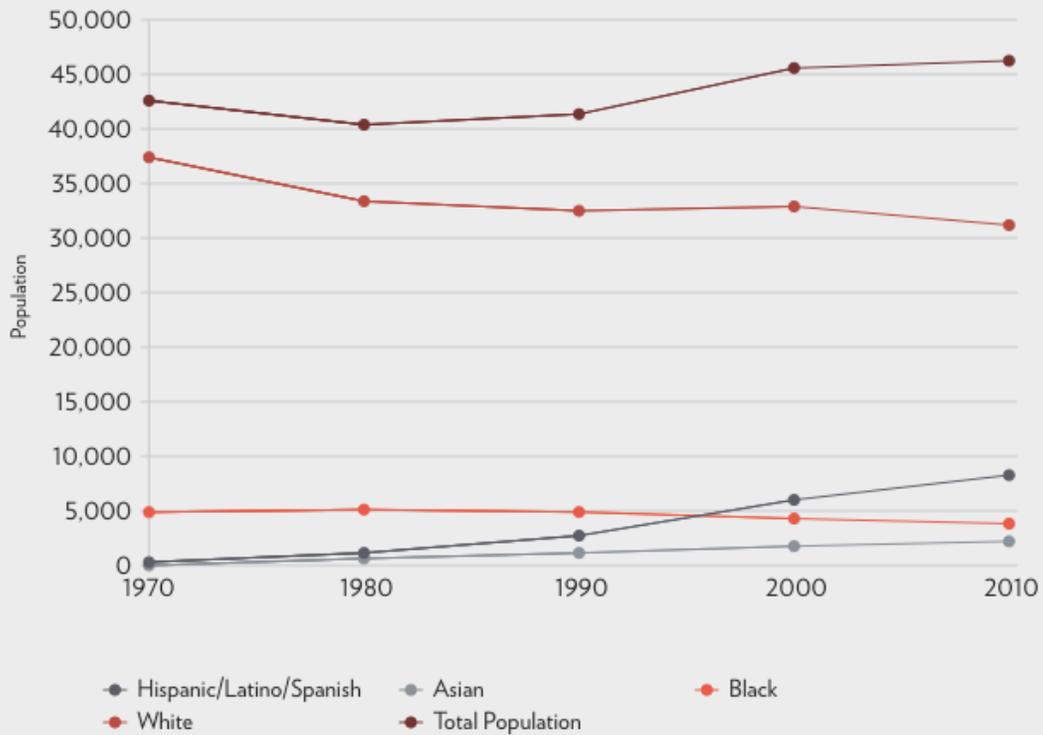
Overall, the Morris School District is composed of three municipalities with notably different demographic profiles. Morris Township has a population that is largely white, highly educated, and economically stable. Morris Plains has a similar profile, though the median household income and educational attainment levels are a bit lower. On the other hand, Morristown is a majority-

minority municipality with a median household income that is more than \$50,000 lower than that of Morris Township, a child poverty rate over 20 percent, and a comparatively low level of educational attainment.

## Population Change: 1970–2010

Between 1970 and 2010, the population of the MSD municipalities increased by 8.6 percent. While the overall population increased, there was a dramatic decrease in the white and black population during this

FIGURE 6. POPULATION CHANGE IN MORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT MUNICIPALITIES, 1970-2010



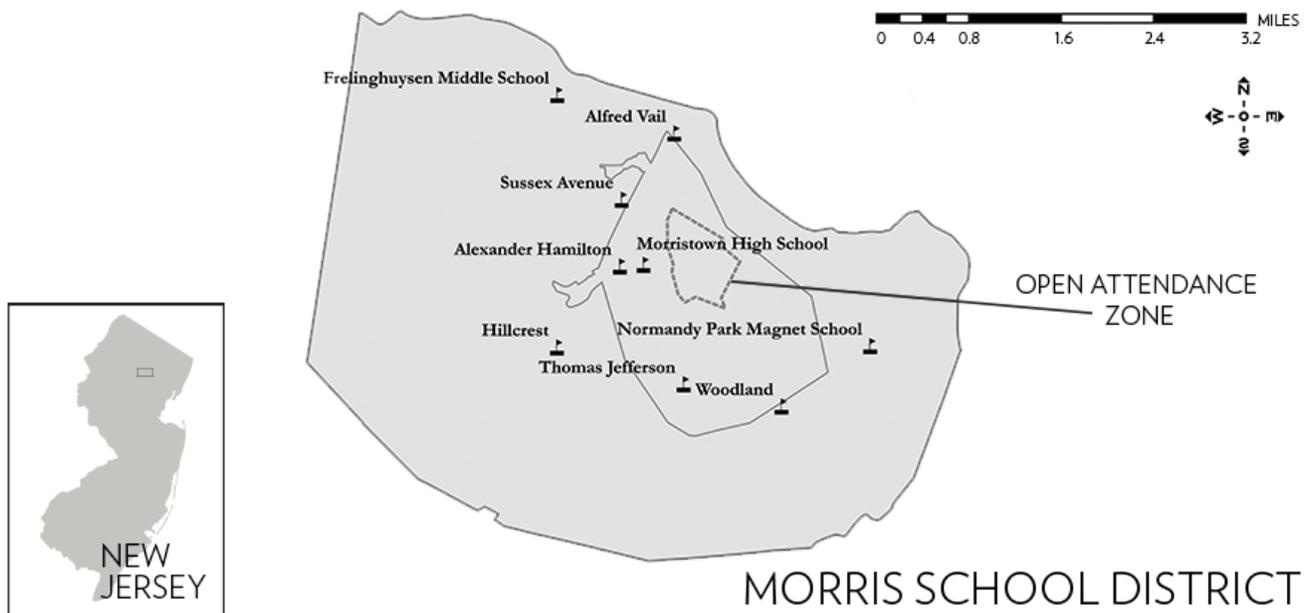
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census.

TABLE 1. PERCENT CHANGE IN MORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT MUNICIPALITIES' POPULATION, 1970-2010

	1970-1980	1980-1990	1990-2000	2000-2010	1970-2010
Total Population	-5.2%	2.4%	10.2%	1.5%	8.6%
White	-10.8%	-2.6%	1.2%	-5.2%	-16.6%
Black	4.8%	-4.4%	-12.3%	-10.7%	-21.6%
Asian		80.9%	54.5%	24.9%	248.9%*
Hispanic/Latino/ Spanish	281.4%	137.6%	120.1%	37.8%	2648.8%

\*This accounts for the population change from 1980-2010.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census.

FIGURE 7. LOCATIONS OF THE SCHOOLS IN THE MORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT



Source: NJ Office of Information Technology (NJOIT), Office of Geographic Information Systems (OGIS) (2015), municipal boundaries and school point locations; Morris School District (2016), open enrollment boundary.

period (see Figure 6 and Table 1). Conversely, there was a dramatic increase in the Hispanic<sup>15</sup> and Asian populations.

The largest percent decrease in the white population took place between 1970 and 1980. This coincides with the period when MSD desegregated its schools in accordance with the 1971 merger order by the state commissioner of education. While the white population decreased by 10.8 percent between 1970 and 1980, the black population increased by 4.8 percent and the Hispanic population increased by 281.4 percent during this ten-year period. The degree to which the decrease in the white population is connected to the merger order is unclear. Between 1970 and 1980, the white population of New Jersey as a whole decreased at a comparable rate (8.4 percent). One may hypothesize that the decrease in the white population of the Morris School District is related to a statewide trend; however, unlike in the state as a whole and the Morris School District, the white population of Morris County as a whole

increased by 1.4 percent. Given that the change in the white population of the Morris School District differed greatly from the overall trend of the white population in the county, it is possible that a portion of this population shift occurred in response to the merger order. While a quantitative analysis fails to either confirm or deny a causal link between the merger order and changes in population, qualitative data from Morristown residents who lived through the merger indicate that there was a degree of white flight in response to the merger.

## Demographic Profile of the Schools in the Morris School District

The Morris School District has an operating budget of approximately \$112,000,000 and employs 427 teachers, 107 other certificated staff, and 371 non-certificated staff.<sup>16</sup> This equates to per-pupil spending of \$21,089, which outpaces the average per-pupil spending across New Jersey. The teaching staff is overwhelmingly white (85.5 percent) and female (76.6 percent). 4.9 percent

TABLE 2. PERCENT CHANGE IN MORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT MUNICIPALITIES' POPULATION, 1970-2010

	Hillcrest / Alexander Hamilton	Woodland / Thomas Jefferson	Alfred Vale / Sussex	Normandy Park	Frelinghuysen Middle School	Morristown High School	District Total
<b># of Students</b>	589	622	655	368	1144	1672	5226
<b>% Male</b>	50.3%	49.7%	51.0%	48.6%	52.1%	51.9%	51.1%
<b>% Female</b>	49.7%	50.3%	49.0%	51.4%	47.9%	48.1%	48.9%
<b>% White</b>	51.4%	50.8%	53.6%	45.1%	51.7%	56.8%	52.3%
<b>% Black</b>	10.2%	9.0%	10.4%	10.1%	11.9%	11.4%	10.9%
<b>% Hispanic</b>	35.3%	34.2%	31.5%	39.4%	30.4%	27.0%	31.8%
<b>% Asian</b>	2.7%	5.9%	4.0%	5.4%	5.6%	4.3%	4.6%
<b>% Free Lunch</b>	34.8%	31.4%	31.6%	34.2%	28.0%	20.9%	29.0%
<b>% Reduced- Price Lunch</b>	5.1%	5.8%	5.5%	3.0%	6.6%	6.0%	5.8%
<b>% Free/ Reduced Price Lunch</b>	39.9%	37.1%	37.1%	37.2%	34.6%	26.9%	34.8%
<b>% Not Qualified for Free/ Reduced Price Lunch</b>	60.1%	62.9%	62.9%	62.8%	65.4%	73.1%	65.2%
<b>% Limited English Proficiency</b>	13.6%	13.0%	7.8%	21.5%	4.0%	8.2%	9.1%
<b>% Not Limited English Proficient</b>	86.4%	87.0%	92.2%	78.5%	96.0%	91.8%	90.9%

Source: New Jersey Department of Education (2015), 2014-2015 School Enrollment File.

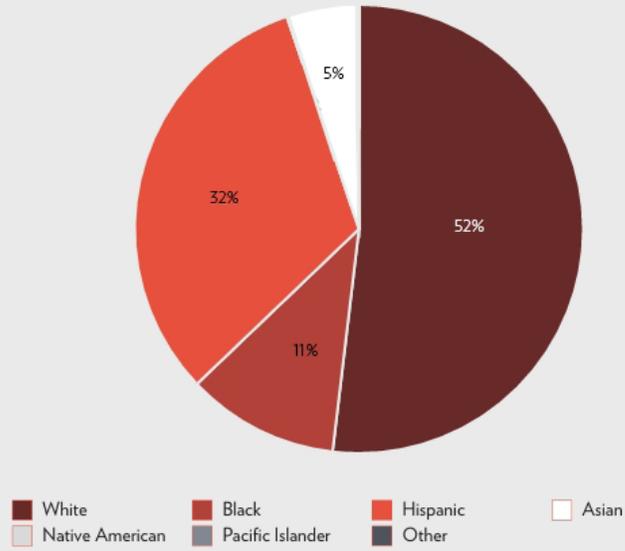
of teachers are black, 7.0 percent are Hispanic, and 2.6 percent are Asian.<sup>17</sup>

The district serves 5,226 students from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. Morristown High School serves 1,672 students and the district's single middle school serves 1,144 students in grades six through eight. Normandy Park, a district magnet school, serves 368 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Finally, there are three pairs of kindergarten through second grade and third through fifth grade sister schools that serve students from kindergarten through fifth grade.

Table 2 provides a summary of student enrollment by demographic group for all MSD schools, and Figure 7 shows the locations of schools across the district.

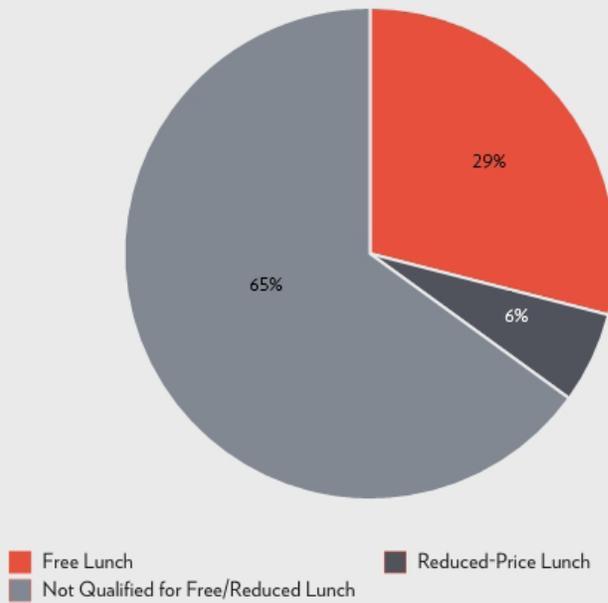
A majority of students in the Morris School District identify as white. As Figure 8 shows, 32 percent of students identify as Hispanic, 11 percent as black, and 5 percent as Asian. As Figure 9 shows, 35 percent of students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch and 9 percent of students are classified as limited English proficient. While the distribution of student subgroups across the four schools serving students

FIGURE 8. RACE/ETHNICITY OF MORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT STUDENTS



Source: New Jersey Department of Education (2015).  
2014-15 School Enrollment File.

FIGURE 9. ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE OF MORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT STUDENTS



Source: New Jersey Department of Education (2015).  
2014-15 School Enrollment File.

TABLE 3. DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS WHO ATTEND PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

	Kindergarten – Grade 8		Grade 9 – Grade 12	
	% Public	% Private	% Public	% Private
<b>Morristown</b>	96.8	3.2	92.5	7.5
<b>Morris Township</b>	82.5	17.5	77.9	22.1
<b>Morris Plains</b>	95.1	4.9	92.6	7.4
<b>Morris School District*</b>	87.9	12.1	85.6	14.4
<b>New Jersey</b>	89.4	10.6	88.6	11.4
<b>Plainfield</b>	92.3	7.7	89.5	10.5
<b>New Brunswick</b>	96.5	3.5	95.1	4.9

\* This includes Morristown and Morris Township for K through 8 schools and all three municipalities for Grades 9-12.  
Source: 2014 American Community Survey.

from kindergarten through fifth grade is comparable, it is worth noting that the magnet school is the sole majority-minority environment and that there is a larger concentration of ELL students at this school (21.5 percent) than at the three K–5 sister schools (7.8 percent to 13.6 percent).

Similar to other areas throughout New Jersey, a portion of children in the Morris School District attends private schools. While the proportion of children in the Morris School District who opt out of the public school system is close to the state average at both the elementary and secondary levels, the proportion of students who attend private school is not evenly distributed across the three municipalities that make up the district. As shown in Table 3, 3.2 percent of elementary school students in Morristown attend private schools, while a much larger 17.5 percent of children in Morris Township opt out of the public school system. A similar trend exists at the secondary level, where 7.5 percent of children in Morristown and 22.1 percent of children in Morris Township go to private schools. The proportion of children in Morris Township who go to private schools is nearly twice the average for New Jersey as a whole and much higher than the rates in Plainfield and New Brunswick. Given that Morris Township has

a much higher median income than Plainfield and New Brunswick, the fact that its private school attendance rate is comparatively high is, perhaps, unsurprising.

## Measures of School and Neighborhood Segregation

The three pairs of kindergarten through second grade and third through fifth grade sister schools and one magnet school serving children in kindergarten through fifth grade are effectively integrated by race and economic advantage/disadvantage. As illustrated by Table 4, which provides a range of segregation measures (including dissimilarity, isolation, and exposure indices), there are extremely low levels of racial and economic dissimilarity among MSD schools serving children in kindergarten through grade five. However, Table 4 also highlights the fact that there is persistent residential segregation among municipalities and neighborhoods delineated by census tracts. For example, while only 2.6 percent of black or white students would need to move schools to create perfectly proportional populations of black and white students at the K–5 schools in the Morris School District, 42.1 percent of black or white residents would need to move neighborhoods (as delineated by census tracts) in order to create perfectly

TABLE 4A. MEASURES OF SEGREGATION FOR WHITE STUDENTS AND POPULATION

	K-5 Schools	K-8 Towns	K-8 Census Tracts	9-12 Towns	9-12 Census Tracts
<b>Dissimilarity with blacks</b>	2.6	33.7	42.1	35.1	43.8
<b>Dissimilarity with Hispanics</b>	4.4	48.4	51.0	47.8	49.6
<b>Dissimilarity with Asians</b>	15.2	10.3	14.1	10.3	13.6
<b>The average white is in a space with</b>					
<b>a % white of</b>	51.2%	72.7%	76.3%	74.2%	77.3%
<b>a % black of</b>	9.9%	7.8%	6.7%	7.1	6.2
<b>a % Hispanic of</b>	34.5	15.0	12.2	14.2	11.7
<b>a % Asian of</b>	4.4	4.5	4.9	4.5	4.7
<b>Percent White</b>	51.0	68.5	68.5	70.4	70.4
Sources: NJ DOE Enrollment File 2014-2015 and 2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.					

TABLE 4B. MEASURES OF SEGREGATION FOR ASIAN STUDENTS AND POPULATION

	K-5 Schools	K-8 Towns	K-8 Census Tracts	9-12 Towns	9-12 Census Tracts
<b>Dissimilarity with whites</b>	10.3	14.1	10.3	13.6	43.8
<b>Dissimilarity with blacks</b>	15.5	23.4	40.6	24.8	40.1
<b>Dissimilarity with Hispanics</b>	11.2	38.1	47.9	37.5	45.2
<b>The average Asian is in a space with</b>					
<b>a % white of</b>	50.6	69.2	74.0	70.8	74.9
<b>a % black of</b>	9.8	8.6	7.3	8.0	6.9
<b>a % Hispanic of</b>	34.8	17.7	13.2	16.8	12.8
<b>a % Asian of</b>	4.8	4.5	5.5	4.4	5.4
<b>Percent Asian</b>	4.4	4.5	4.5	4.4	4.4
Sources: NJ DOE Enrollment File 2014-2015 and 2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.					

TABLE 4C. MEASURES OF SEGREGATION FOR BLACK STUDENTS AND POPULATION

	K-5 Schools	K-8 Towns	K-8 Census Tracts	9-12 Towns	9-12 Census Tracts
<b>Dissimilarity with whites</b>	2.6	33.7	42.1	35.1	43.8
<b>Dissimilarity with Hispanics</b>	4.3	14.7	20.8	14.3	20.1
<b>Dissimilarity with Asians</b>	15.5	23.4	40.6	24.8	40.1
<b>The average black is in a space with</b>					
<b>a % white of</b>	51.0	61.3	52.7	62.4	54.3
<b>a % black of</b>	10.0	10.3	13.6	10.0	13.1
<b>a % Hispanic of</b>	34.6	23.4	29.8	23.2	28.8
<b>a % Asian of</b>	4.4	4.4	3.8	4.4	3.8
<b>Percent black</b>	10.0	8.7	8.7	8.0	8.0
Sources: NJ DOE Enrollment File 2014-2015 and 2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.					

TABLE 4D. MEASURES OF SEGREGATION FOR HISPANIC STUDENTS AND POPULATION

	K-5 Schools	K-8 Towns	K-8 Census Tracts	9-12 Towns	9-12 Census Tracts
<b>Dissimilarity with whites</b>	4.4	48.5	51.0	47.8	49.6
<b>Dissimilarity with blacks</b>	4.3	14.7	20.8	14.3	20.1
<b>Dissimilarity with Asians</b>	11.2	38.1	47.9	37.5	45.2
<b>The average Hispanic is in a space with</b>					
<b>a % white of</b>	50.8	56.3	45.6	58.1	48.1
<b>a % black of</b>	9.9	11.4	14.2	10.9	13.5
<b>a % Hispanic of</b>	34.8	27.9	36.9	26.7	35.1
<b>a % Asian of</b>	4.5	4.4	3.3	4.4	3.3
<b>Percent Hispanic</b>	35.0	18.2	18.2	17.2	17.2
Sources: NJ DOE Enrollment File 2014-2015 and 2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.					

TABLE 4E. MEASURES OF SEGREGATION FOR LIMITED LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY STUDENTS

	K-5 Schools	K-8 Towns	K-8 Census Tracts	9-12 Towns	9-12 Census Tracts
<b>Dissimilarity with no LEP</b>	13.6				
<b>The average LEP child is in a space with</b>					
<b>a % LEP of</b>	14.6				
<b>a % no LEP of</b>	85.5				
<b>Percent LEP</b>	13.0				
Sources: NJ DOE Enrollment File 2014-2015 and 2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.					

TABLE 4F. MEASURES OF SEGREGATION FOR FREE/REDUCED PRICE LUNCH STUDENTS

	K-12 School	K-8 Towns	K-8 Census Tracts	9-12 Towns	9-12 Census Tracts
<b>Dissimilarity with no FRL</b>	2.3				
<b>The average FRL child is in a space with</b>					
<b>a % FRL of</b>	37.9				
<b>a % no FRL of</b>	62.1				
<b>Percent FLR</b>	37.9				
Sources: NJ DOE Enrollment File 2014-2015 and 2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.					

TABLE 4G. MEASURES OF SEGREGATION FOR CHILD POVERTY IN STUDENTS AND POPULATION

	K-12 School	K-8 Towns	K-8 Census Tracts	9-12 Towns	9-12 Census Tracts
<b>Dissimilarity with non-child poverty</b>		43.0	52.7	46.4	54.7
<b>The average child in poverty is in a space with</b>					
<b>a % child poverty of</b>		17.0	27.6	16.7	27.1
<b>a % non-child poverty of</b>		83.0	72.4	83.3	72.9
<b>% Children in Poverty</b>		21.0	21.0	21.0	21.0
Sources: NJ DOE Enrollment File 2014-2015 and 2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.					

proportional populations of black and white people across neighborhoods.

Dissimilarity indices between white and black students, white and Hispanic students, black and Hispanic students, and students who qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch and students who do not are all less than 5.0. In other words, less than 5 percent of these populations would need to move schools to create student populations that are perfectly proportional by these demographic groups. Isolation indices and exposure indices produce similar results indicating that black, white, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, and non-economically disadvantaged students attend schools where they are exposed to students from each demographic group in a manner that is proportional to the total population for the school district.

Dissimilarity indices between Asian students and each of the other racial/ethnic groups are slightly elevated (11.2 to 15.5). Similarly, the dissimilarity index for students classified as limited English proficient and students who are not is slightly elevated at 13.6. This means that Asian students and students classified as limited English proficient are not proportionally distributed across schools, and, therefore, are more isolated.

## Educational Outcomes in the Morris School District

Educational outcomes in the Morris School District are mixed. Table 5 shows mean scale scores and the percent of students who score at a level deemed proficient on the 2014 English Language Arts (ELA) and Math New Jersey Assessment of Skills (NJASK) for students in the third, fifth, and eighth grades. It also shows mean scale scores and percent proficient on the 2014 ELA and Math High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA).

When compared to students across New Jersey, students in the Morris School District score close to

average at all grade levels on both the ELA and math exams. When compared to students at schools with similar socioeconomic profiles,<sup>18</sup> students in the Morris School District score below average at virtually all grade levels on both the ELA and math exams (the one exception is fifth grade ELA scores).

When compared to students at schools in the highly segregated school districts of New Brunswick and Plainfield, students in the Morris School District on average do much better on ELA and math exams at all grade levels. However, it is necessary to note that Plainfield is designated as part of the state's District Factor Grouping (DFG) B, and New Brunswick as part of DFG A; both of these DFGs are characterized by low socioeconomic status. Because of the strong correlation between socioeconomic status and student achievement on standardized tests, it is difficult to infer much about the impact school desegregation has on student outcomes from these data.

While overall student achievement in the Morris School District is average in comparison to the rest of New Jersey, student subgroup data reveal a number of noteworthy trends. Table 6 shows the percent of Morris School District students scoring as well as or better than other students across the state of New Jersey by demographic subgroup, grade, and subject. This analysis uses mean scale scores from the 2010–2014 NJASK and HSPA tests and the number of valid test scores for each demographic subgroup to determine the average percent of MSD students scoring as well as or better than other students across the state of New Jersey by demographic subgroup.

On average, white students in the Morris School District outperform the white students in New Jersey on all tests and at all grade levels. In the fifth grade, the average white student in the Morris School District does as well as or better than 90.6 percent of their white peers in all public schools across the state on the ELA exam and as well as or better than 90.8 percent of their white peers across the state on the math exam. Similarly,

TABLE 5. PERCENT PROFICIENT AND MEAN SCALE SCORES  
ON 2014 NJASK AND HSPA ELA AND MATH EXAMS

	Third Grade				Fifth Grade				Eighth Grade				Tenth Grade			
	ELA		Math		ELA		Math		ELA		Math		ELA		Math	
	% Proficient	Mean Scale Score														
<b>Morris School District</b>	66.0	206.6	73.8	230.3	75.3	215.7	86.3	244.7	78.2	218.7	75.2	226.4	92.6	238.3	78.2	229.4
<b>DFG GH</b>	77.4	212.9	84.7	243.0	75.2	214.1	88.1	244.6	87.8	227.0	80.8	236.6	96.6	242.2	86.7	233.2
<b>New Jersey</b>	65.5	205.8	75.5	230.6	62.3	205.6	79.8	233.8	79.8	220.1	71.5	225.2	93.2	236.8	78.9	226.1
<b>Plainfield School District</b>	38.8	190.5	52.7	203.9	32.0	187.5	59.6	208.8	52.2	199.8	23.9	183.8	80.2	216.3	46.2	199.0
<b>New Brunswick School District</b>	24.1	183.5	49.5	199.6	25.9	184.1	63.9	211.2	48.4	198.3	45.1	191.7	82.4	221.1	53.6	204.0

Source: NJ DOE Statewide Assessment Reports

TABLE 6. PERCENT OF MORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT STUDENTS SCORING AS WELL AS OR BETTER THAN OTHER STUDENTS ACROSS THE STATE OF NEW JERSEY (FIVE-YEAR AVERAGES)

	Third Grade		Fifth Grade		Eighth Grade		Tenth Grade	
	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math	ELA	Math
<b>All Students</b>	50.2	47.7	69.4	66.1	58.4	61.5	51.4	57.9
<b>White</b>	71.9	73.0	90.6	90.8	80.0	86.0	78.9	81.5
<b>Black</b>	63.3	58.2	81.2	76.2	66.8	68.0	52.2	48.6
<b>Hispanic</b>	28.5	22.2	59.3	51.7	51.4	57.9	34.9	46.6
<b>Asian</b>	50.7	46.0	61.3	64.2	46.3	37.8	36.3	42.4
<b>Economically disadvantaged</b>	27.3	17.9	60.6	45.9	42.8	44.6	34.7	32.1
<b>Non-economically disadvantaged</b>	59.0	58.4	81.3	82.3	63.7	67.5	54.5	60.9
<b>English language learners</b>	17.9	17.8	46.2	40.5	66.8	68.2	23.6	14.9

Source: NJ DOE Statewide Assessment Reports

black students in the Morris School District on average outperform their black peers at all public schools across the state on both third grade exams, both fifth grade exams, both eighth grade exams, and the tenth grade ELA exam. Conversely, with few exceptions, Hispanic students, economically disadvantaged students, and students classified as limited English proficient underperform when compared to their peers from the same subgroups across the state. English Language Learners in the Morris School District only do as well as or better than 23.6 percent of other ELL students in New Jersey on the tenth grade ELA exam. These data suggest that the Morris School District does a good job of serving white and black students, but that it fails to adequately meet the needs of Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, and ELL students.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, graduation rates in the Morris School District are average for New Jersey. The mean four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate from 2011-2015 in the Morris School District was 89.44 percent as compared to the state average of 89.77 percent. This ranks the Morris School District's high school graduation rate as 185th of the 296 districts serving high school students across the state.<sup>20</sup>

While the analysis provided in this section does offer some insight into educational outcomes in the Morris School District, it is important to note that much of it is based on the results of standardized tests that are administered at a single moment in the school year, and that only evaluate certain prescribed skills and knowledge in math and ELA. Such limited measures must not be given more credence than they deserve. Therefore, it is essential to consider this quantitative analysis within the context of the qualitative data presented throughout the rest of this report.

## Analysis and Discussion of the Successes and Failures of the MSD Effort

The Morris School District's long-term interest and investment in making diversity work, both academically and socially, have contributed to its success. In fact, for forty-five years, Morris has been able to both attract and maintain a racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse student body, desegregated schools, and a strong academic reputation (that goes beyond test score averages). This has occurred even as the demographics have shifted from a black/white population in the 1970s to a black/white/Hispanic population in 2016. A key motivating factor behind generating this report was to understand why and how the MSD has succeeded where so many others have failed.

Our emerging qualitative findings on the Morris School District in this section are derived from sixty-four individual interviews and eight focus groups with a diverse sample of Morristown respondents at the community, district, and school level (see Appendix C for a description of data collection and methods). The semi-structured interviews with district administrators, teachers, school board members, parents, and students were triangulated with school and classroom observations. During this exploration, we found that there were three main reasons behind the Morris School District's success: (1) the Morristown community is morally committed to public education and the collective benefits of diversity; (2) community members believe that, in order to have a successful district, you need to have a supportive community and strong family partnerships with the schools; and (3) although, the district's response to some of the

challenges that school diversity imposes on the schools has been slow and uneven over the years, respondents believe that the positives outweigh the negatives.

While the merger and associated policies created districtwide diversity and desegregated schools at the building level, students in diverse schools—in MSD as well as in other diverse districts—are often educated in classrooms that are less diverse, whether the measure is race, ethnicity, language or socioeconomic status (SES). MSD is aware of the problem and has made efforts to progress toward true integration, including changing the admissions process for gifted and talented classes (G&T), creating heterogeneous math groups in elementary school, eliminating the lowest B-level track in high school, using multiple measures for course placement decisions in middle school, and hiring a high school counselor to support students of color and make sure they are on track for college. Yet, in many respondents' eyes, there remains much work to be done to achieve true integration inside school walls. In the sections that follow, we outline the successes and challenges of MSD—a district that chooses to make diversity work.

## Moral Commitment to Public Education and Collective Benefits of Diversity

Part of the Morris district's success is traceable to the investment in making diversity work in the schools that took root in the community at the time of the school merger or even earlier, and continues to this day. Respondents who experienced the merger first hand spoke about the “fertile ground” in which the merger took place, both in terms of the people and the place. At the time of the merger, an influential group of residents came together to support public education and spearhead the effort to regionalize the separate K–8 Morris Township school district with Morristown's K–12 district. This pro-merger group of residents feared that, if the mostly white township pulled its students

out of Morristown High School, the school would eventually become an all-black school. They worried that, if the township built a separate high school and stopped sending its students to Morristown, there would be rampant white flight. Steve Wiley, who was the leader of the pro-merger movement, was quoted in a recent newspaper article about the reason he pushed for the regional school district: “Separate, segregated high schools would hasten white flight from Morristown, dooming it to the same turmoil afflicting New Jersey's urban centers.”<sup>21</sup>

Another influential person who worked with Wiley in the fight to regionalize the two districts was a black township resident named Wanda.<sup>22</sup> In her interview, she said that it took “people of good will” in Morristown to fight for equal opportunity in housing and education. Like other school desegregation battles fought across the country, the integration movement in Morris started with a strong group of supporters. In Morristown, this group included fair housing advocates, the NAACP, the Urban League, school board members, educators and the clergy.

An important part of making diversity work in the community, therefore, was the enforcement of the state's fair housing law, which we were told was an essential first step toward school integration. For instance, Wanda, whose family was the first black family to move into the majority white township in 1955, believed that, in order to have racial balance in the schools, you had to have fair housing laws to achieve racial balance in housing “because of the theory of the neighborhood school.”

Of course, there also were people, mostly in the township, who preferred the status quo of segregated neighborhood schools, and voted against the merger. Yet, according to Wanda, there were enough people in the town and township “willing to bring about social change” who were not afraid of “going to school with the black people.” As an example of how special the Morristown community is, she said, that the “Morris School District was the first to honor Dr. King's birthday

as a national holiday. These types of things wouldn't happen in just any district. It may be that you had enough blacks, enough minorities, enough to make the difference, you know? You had enough white people of good will to bring it about." Wanda declared, "If there's ever going to be a place where true integration is going to happen, it's going to be in Morris County."

In our interviews, respondents consistently cited community activism around fair housing and school integration for making Morristown a successful place in which to live for decades after the merger occurred. In fact, Jessica, who is the director of a prominent community organization in town, explained that this group of pro-merger residents who were around for a long time would get their contemporaries to say, "I'm going to live in Morristown and send my kids to that high school and I'm going to elect people I know to the school board and it's going to stay a great high school for everybody."

We found that current homeowners and parents want the school district to succeed, even if they choose private school for their children's education, because, as one white parent remarked, "a strong school system is the foundation of a strong community." This symbiotic relationship between the community and schools was evident when respondents described Morristown. As one principal, Cindy, remarked, the community has "a core group of people who really believe in public education, supporting public education." The town is also known for being a downtown destination. Cindy said: "everybody shops here. People go down to the Green [the town square]. They go to the local restaurants. It's a very vital community, so I think people—they walk around together. People aren't isolated in their own little neighborhoods, which is nice." This environment, where the school district is seen as the bedrock of the community, continues to be part of the attraction of living in Morristown today.

## Achieving School-Level Diversity Post-Merger

The district's commitment to making diversity work is evident by its student assignment plan that extends beyond the district level to the school level. After the merger, respondents explained that the district decided to implement the "Princeton Plan" to diversify elementary schools by pairing a primary (K–2) school with an intermediate (3–5) school—with one located in the town and the other paired school located in the township. The creators of the plan also moved teachers around in order to mix them up between former Morristown and Morris Township schools.

The Princeton Plan had been developed in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1948. Under it, schools were grouped by grade level, rather than geography, as a way to achieve diversity. Today, many districts adopt the Princeton Plan for economic purposes rather than for diversity. MSD also uses geography to achieve racial diversity in schools by designating the center of town as an open assignment area because it was, and still is, where many low-income black and Hispanic residents live. Students living in this area are bused to various neighborhood schools across the district to achieve racial balance and desegregate schools. Every other assignment area has a neighborhood school.

When you compare other "diverse" districts in New Jersey, such as Montclair or South Orange-Maplewood, with Morris, the other districts typically have a higher level of between-school segregation caused by neighborhood residential segregation. In Morris, as one white parent said, "it is an effort here [to desegregate elementary schools], but it's not an effort on the part of the citizen. That's taken care of by the school district, so it's not at the burden of me and everyone realizes that whichever elementary your child goes to, there's a balance." In other words, the "burden" to choose school diversity is not on individual parents since the district does the work for them with the Princeton Plan and the open assignment area. Even with the presence of relatively segregated neighborhoods in Morris and

demographic change, the schools remain diverse because the structures are in place to accommodate those changes. The other benefit of diverse elementary schools is that students are exposed to diversity beginning in kindergarten. This makes for a smoother transition to middle school and high school because the students have been educated in diverse classrooms throughout their K–5 educational careers.

## Choosing School Diversity and Well-Balanced Curriculum and Extracurricular Activities

Parents have school choice options in Morris County, including the surrounding white homogeneous suburban districts and private schools. As noted, the proportion of children in Morris Township who go to private schools is nearly twice the average for New Jersey as a whole. Therefore, those families with means to choose, who enroll their children in the MSD public schools do so in part because they value diversity for their children’s educational experience. White parents, in particular, said that they look beyond the lower test score averages and rankings in Morristown because they know the district has much to offer—namely diversity and high quality academics and extracurricular activities.<sup>25</sup> As one white public school parent in our study commented, “Nobody lives here by accident; we all made a conscious decision to choose diversity.”

A white district administrator whom we interviewed, named Helen, said she works with realtors and talks to families who are considering moving to Morristown—often parents or couples without children moving from New York City. She explained: “People have the opposite perception of what a good community is. [Instead of wanting a racially homogeneous district,] a diverse community is becoming something that people are intentionally seeking rather than avoiding.” Helen believes that people are more “enlightened” today and “recognize how important diversity is for a strong community”:

People are slowly recognizing that this is a good thing, that a community is healthier and richer just like a garden is healthier and richer if you have different things there. I think in Morris County, probably more so than maybe upper Bergen County where most of this community is affluent and purely white, Morristown is—we’re different. We’re different, so if someone says “I want to move to Morris County” and they’re looking at SAT scores, average SAT scores, or “I want to walk past a school and see only kids that look like my kids”—it’s difficult.

As one realtor told us, more and more parents are realizing that the “test scores [in MSD] are not the highest,” as compared to “lily white places like Chatham, Madison, or Millburn” because of the diversity. They also realize that test scores are not the only indicator of educational success. There are nonacademic outcomes that parents are also looking for. For instance, during the interview with Peter, a white father who relocated to New Jersey for his job about ten years ago, he explained how he and his wife weighed the pros and cons of the Morris district when choosing where to live and send their children to school:

I mean, if you think about the other places we were looking [at] before we bought our house—Randolph, Madison, Summit, places where the middle school and the high school tend to be smaller, they tend to be much less diverse racially, ethnically and socioeconomically. They’re higher performing as a result because of the way those things correlate . . . but both for pragmatic reasons about buying a house and what we could afford and also a sense that there was a lot of virtue in having our kids go to schools that better reflected the real world that they would be entering and the diversity of the country, and that they had a lot to learn and benefit from that experience.

As Peter implied, parents' understand that Morris is ranked lower by *US News* or *New Jersey Monthly*, compared to more homogeneous and majority white districts "where everyone is the same," because of its diverse context—and the fact that socioeconomics are highly correlated with standardized test scores.

MSD alumni and current students view diversity as a unique advantage in preparing them for the "real world" that their peers in more homogeneous (majority white) school districts do not receive. During the focus group in which we asked white high school students to compare their experiences with students who attend majority white schools, one student said: "I feel like since we go to this school, we have a better grip on the segregation that occurs. If we were to go to Mendham, those kids would be blatantly racist without even realizing it." A second student replied, "It is real life. Our town, the racial diversity, that's actual life." A third student followed up by saying, "That's why I love it!" During this year's high school graduation ceremony, the student government president said this about the benefits of diversity at MSD:

What we will miss most about Morristown High is the diversity. Morristown High represents more than nineteen different native languages. However, the diversity of the school runs far deeper than the color of any student's skin or color of ancestry. Walking around the school you will find far more than the typical scholars and athletes, but also musicians, artists, filmmakers, and aspiring scientists—ultimately disrupting the high school status quo.<sup>24</sup>

According to respondents, some of the biggest benefits of diversity are to prepare students to work with students who are different than they are, and, even more importantly, to break down stereotypes and boundaries between groups. For instance, during one of the teacher focus groups, teachers spoke about an English assignment in which students were asked to research

and write a report about positive Latino influences on American culture. Student assignments ranged from "struggles of being an undocumented worker, another student wrote about inventors, while others wrote about leaders, politicians and celebrities" with the goal of changing negative perceptions into positive ones. Similarly, a Latino student during a student focus group replied: "You have to break the boundaries. That's one thing I will say. People here, once you do break that social—once you break that stereotype, it's like, Oh, really we aren't different. We're actually—we're very similar." In so many ways, MSD students are learning how to cross cultural, racial, and socioeconomic status divides in their schools and community. These are important lessons to learn if the goal is to become more tolerant citizens in an increasingly diverse society.

The other reasons parents gave for choosing Morris, besides the diversity, are the high-quality and specialized educational programs and extracurricular activities the district has to offer. The 2015 Niche Award for Best Public High Schools ranks Morristown High School (MHS) number one for extracurricular programs in Morris County and gives it A+ for academic achievement. MHS's course offerings are diverse and include culinary arts, broadcasting, music, and STEM—that, as one district administrator said, "continue to bring people in."

The high school also has had notable success with its sports teams, which undeniably attract families to the district. During the 2015–16 school year, the successes include state, regional, and county accolades in sports such as golf and hockey, as well as track and field.

Additionally, the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math program, or STEM Academy, is in its fourth year and serves 150 students in grades nine through eleven. STEM students take their regular courses and then are able to take electives in such areas as Robotics, Aerospace Engineering, or Anatomy and Physiology.<sup>25</sup> This year, STEM students on the MHS science team

won first place in the county and eighth place in the state during the annual New Jersey State Science Fair competition.

Other accomplishments include the MHS Theatre Department winning a prestigious all-state award for the performance of *A Christmas Carol*. The department also won an inclusion and access award for including students with disabilities in all areas of theatre production.

Morristown High School also has an Olympic-size swimming pool and a live radio station. Respondents boasted that the AP test scores are “through the roof” and college-going rates are high, which they said balances out the other factors. The district’s spring 2015 newsletter boasts that eleven students were admitted to Ivy League schools, more than many of the nearby predominantly white and upper-income high schools can claim. Additionally, “50 percent of MHS seniors who applied to a four-year college were admitted to colleges rated by Baron’s Guide to Colleges as “Most Competitive” or “Highly Competitive.”<sup>26</sup> As one white teacher exclaimed during the teacher focus group, “you’ve got something for everyone” at Morris. In fact, MSD’s mission is to “accommodate equity” by meeting every student’s needs.<sup>27</sup>

Not only that, but Morris appears to be at the forefront of resisting testing metrics as sole indicators of educational achievement. Parents and administrators appreciate that Morris puts education first, and that test prep, accountability and standards get less priority, which is not the case in many other districts. This is evident by the considerable number of families who chose to have their students opt out of the most recent state tests—in fact, nearly 90 percent of eleventh-graders opted out of the ELA exam in 2015.<sup>28</sup> An elementary school principal, Cindy, said of the district “traditionally they don’t focus on the testing.” Instead, they focus on cultural arts and an integrated curriculum. She said they certainly want students to learn the basics

and come to school motivated to learn, but they do not believe that “drill and kill” for the tests is the way to achieve that goal. One white district administrator, named Marty, who had experience working in another New Jersey district before coming to Morris, replied that in Morris the emphasis is on education and what is best for the students. He likened the educational approach that Morris takes to a “dinosaur, in a very good way”:

This school is what schools used to be like before the reform movement and all of this accountability reform where everything has to be measured and it’s the only thing that matters. It’s all about rubrics. Here, it’s all about education. The discussion is always about what’s best for the kids. That may not seem like something special, but it’s not what’s happening in schools now. Those discussions—schools are about management, control, measurement, rubrics, accountability. We do those things, but I think . . . at this place, it’s about really creating an educational environment and doing what’s best for kids.

The Morris district is very aware that it is competing with private schools for students, so it is starting to do more public relations work to share its accomplishments. Patty, a white former student and current high school parent, explained that she is helping the district reach out to alumni about their experiences in Morris for marketing purposes. She told a story about one former student she interviewed who said, “When I got to Princeton I felt just as prepared academically for my experience that would happen at Princeton, but I felt more prepared than my peers for being able to work in groups and understand and respect the differences of others.” What the district is finding is that because of their exposure to diversity, Morris graduates feel better prepared socially and academically than their college peers who went to racially and socioeconomically homogeneous districts.

## Strong Community and Family Partnership with the Schools

Another reason that respondents believe the district merger for racial balance purposes worked in Morristown was because there was, and still is, a strong coalition of community, civic and religious organizations that support the work of the school district through tutoring and afterschool programs. There are also structures in place in the community within the large network of nonprofit organizations and churches that produce socially and academically positive results when issues or problems come up. This collaborative effort in the Morris district, and especially in Morristown, seems distinctive if not unique.

### Building Bridges with the Schools

Substantial evidence emerged in our interviews that the schools and community are working together to help low-income students overcome challenges in school and at home and level the playing field. For example, each student in grades 6–12 is given a personal Chromebook to use in the classroom and to take home to do their homework. The district realized that some low-income students did not have access to Internet at home—making it hard to complete their assignments. Therefore, the Morris Educational Foundation raised funds for Kajeet Smartspot Mi-fi devices, which give students access to the Internet in any setting.

Another area of concern for the district is the availability of preschool for low-income families with one possibility being an expansion of MSD's pre-K program for children with special needs. An MSD administrator, Betsy, said one of the areas that she has been working on is kindergarten-readiness and building relationships with the different preschool providers in the community. She said she has been going to the preschool centers and conducting parent workshops on what kinds of things children should be doing over the summer to build literacy skills in Spanish or English.

Betsy went on to say that her favorite program for students is the after-school tutoring program at the churches. She said this is an example of a true partnership between the schools and community:

The schools identify the kids who need the tutoring and then we provide transportation and the churches get volunteers. I go and train the volunteers to tutor the kids on what to do and what to look for and those sorts of things. The kids go for two hours a week for tutoring to these churches. So for me, that is what Morristown is about. Nobody is saying, "No, we don't want to help."

Betsy said that she meets with the pastors, reverends, the women who run the Sunday school who do the tutoring, and "When you talk about really what it looks like here for us day to day, that's a great picture of how we can engage people. I don't think that's the same in every place." Betsy and others in the community believe that this strong community–school connection makes for a better place to live.

A looming problem for the district, however, is figuring out the best way to deal with the growing Hispanic population. The main challenges include the need for more bilingual staff and continued improvement in outreach efforts to Hispanic families. The district is responding to the challenge by recruiting and hiring more Spanish speaking staff. The superintendent reported that since June 2015, the district hired ten bilingual teachers, and 31 percent of all new hires (counselors, administrators, and teachers) speak Spanish.

## Outreach to the Hispanic Community

Respondents said that Hispanic families, particularly new immigrants from Central America, face many barriers to participating in their child's education,

with language being the biggest hurdle to overcome. Additionally, a large percentage of Hispanic students come from single-parent households, or both of their parents work, or they live with extended family members—making it difficult sometimes for caregivers to become involved in the schools. As a result of this steady influx of Hispanic families into MSD, including a group of seventy-one unaccompanied minors from Central America in 2014, the district recognized that it quickly needed to address the needs of Hispanic students. Thus, the district created a new ELL/bilingual supervisor position and filled two new social support positions—a “district outreach teacher” named Maria, and a “bilingual academic support counselor” named Teresa.

Maria’s job is to be a part-time high school teacher of Spanish and a part-time outreach worker to Hispanic parents. She is a Latina teacher who grew up in Morristown and went to the public schools. She also is on the board of the Neighborhood House, an important civic organization in Morristown that started as part of the settlement house movement many years ago and has been very involved and invested in the Hispanic community in recent years. Maria said one of the first things she did in her new position was create a database of all the parents who spoke Spanish in order to communicate with them about the schools and get them to come to Back to School Night and meet their children’s teachers. Maria pointed out that there are only 8–10 percent of students in the district who are classified as ELL. However, she found out through a home language survey that there are some Hispanic students who speak English, yet their parents speak Spanish and were not getting information in Spanish sent home. This was the population she was trying to identify because, as she explained, only a few Hispanic parents come to school events, which some may interpret as a sign that they do not care about their child’s education.

She sent out flyers, made phone calls, and did outreach to the Spanish churches, which resulted in seventy

Spanish-speaking families attending Back to School Night in 2015. Maria thought this was a great success because the parents want to help, they just do not know how. She has been hearing how appreciative the parents are to get the information and have her as a point person in the school because, “I know that for the Latino community, our biggest barrier is language.” Therefore, increasing access to information and showing parents how to advocate for their children are some of her biggest priorities moving forward. Maria remains hopeful that strides are being made to improve outreach, which she believes will translate into improved achievement levels: “I really do think that, if the Latino community was fully engaged, we’d be making history for how Morristown High School got Latinos to be at the top of the whatever. Across the country, Latinos are failing.”

The broader Morristown community also is spearheading efforts to empower the Hispanic community. For example, community organizations offer programs such as “Parents as Partners,” at which school district staff meet with parents to discuss issues such as “What is a grade? What is a credit? What does a report card mean?” They also discuss how parents and guardians can access their children’s grades and attendance records online through an academic community platform, called Blackboard. The Neighborhood House, which provides after-school programming to low-income students, has hired more bilingual staff and offers various parent workshops in Spanish about child rearing and school topics. Other concerted efforts on the part of the district to bridge the divide between the schools and the Hispanic community include hiring more bilingual staff, and having all announcements and school presentations provided in Spanish via headsets.

The district also recently hired a bilingual social worker named Teresa to help high school students adjust to life in Morristown—both inside and outside of school. Teresa described what she does for students and their families:

It starts out with me with the basics: food, clothing, shelter. I'm always the one that they're coming to if they're not getting their free lunch. I like it that they start to know that I'm the one they can come to for that. "Oh, if you're not getting your free lunch," I said, "Tell your friends that if they're not getting their free lunch and they haven't filled out the form and they don't know about the form, or reduced lunch, come to me because I can help them with that." Some of them are—you know, it's all about trying to negotiate a huge system, too. We have almost 2,000 kids. "Well, where do I go? What is the central office? Someone else called it something else to me." It's the language. It's everything.

Teresa explained that it is not just the lack of education of the students, but the parents too. This makes it difficult to explain everything to them and get permission from caregivers to provide services. She estimated that it takes "ten times more time with this [unaccompanied] kid, than you spend with the average kid. It's arduous."

This partnership among the community, family and schools is far from perfect in some people's eyes. However, like so many issues in Morristown there is a strong sense of hope among respondents that things can and will be improved to provide more access and opportunity and to close gaps. Illustrating this positive attitude in the district, Cindy remarked: "So I think we've done a good job of whatever the challenge is, okay, we're going to take that up and not throw up our hands. That's a very positive thing and I think because parents see that."

## Overcoming the Challenges of School Diversity

MSD is proud of its long-term commitment to diversity at the district and school levels. However, one of the biggest criticisms of the district is that,

although administrators are aware of the achievement gaps and the racial/ethnic disparities in course taking, there has been a slow and uneven response to these problems. We outline below some of the challenges that diversity imposes on MSD, including racialized tracking and ability grouping, catering to white families, and meeting the language and social-emotional needs of recently arrived Hispanic immigrants. We discuss the community and student response to these problems, and how district administrators are addressing them.

### The Achievement Gap and Attempts to Diversify Courses

In 2012, the perception that the district was slow to address the achievement gap issue prompted an active group of black parents to get together and confront the district. We interviewed four black parents who were part of this group, and they explained how they brought attention to the problem at HSA meetings, school board meetings, and even had regular discussions with the high school principal and superintendent. They advocated for more administrators and teachers of color in the schools, and wanted the district to track student progress and catch students early who were falling behind. Yet, as Trista, a black public school parent who was part of this group of concerned parents, stated, from the district's perspective "they told us that it's not something new and that they were very aware of it and that they were working on it. We just felt like they weren't working hard enough on it." In other words, the parents felt it was all talk and little action.

Administrators slowly began to realize that there was a need for true integration in the classroom, and that early intervention, starting in elementary school, was most effective in preparing students for high-level courses when they arrived in high school. One of the first things they did was hire academic support counselors to work directly with students of color in the high school. It was the hope that the counselors could identify students who were "borderline" between A-level and Honors courses, and encourage students of

color to take the more advanced classes. Not only that, but the counselors would act as a support system to help students develop study skills, form study groups with other students, and make sure they are doing all of their work. A counselor's role is to ask, "Why don't you take this class? Don't take this one, take this one. You're going to have to work a little bit harder but I'll help you. If you have trouble along the way, I'm going to be here for you." Trista replied: "I think we need more of that."

One of the support counselors we interviewed, named Joe, stated that there is a perception in the teaching staff that "some students just are not capable," which then unfortunately causes students of color to feel less motivated and not enroll in the upper tracks. Therefore, part of his job was to encourage students to challenge themselves. In 2014, the counseling office started a 3.0 [GPA] club for upperclassmen to be role models for the younger students and say, "I went through that too, but this is what you need to do to be successful. One day you'll be past all of that. You're not past it now, but I'm telling you, one day you will be." The high school also offers a very popular and successful social and academic support center for students of color, called Teen Pride.

Black parents consistently spoke highly about the support counselors because they made sure students "did not fall through the cracks" in school. These black and Hispanic counselors also were seen as being role models for students of color and simply "understanding the struggle." They are there to show students that they are capable of achieving at higher levels, and not just think that passing is acceptable. However, at the same time, parents also were skeptical that the counselors were going to make enough difference to truly address black students' poor achievement. They also felt that there was a lot of "uncomfortable-ness around issues of race" when they discussed the problems with district administrators.

Another recent initiative that the former middle school principal put in place to help diversify Honors and AP

courses in the high school was to use multiple criteria for course placements in middle school. To get into middle school Honors courses, the principal started putting a greater emphasis on grades and fifth grade teacher recommendations, as he said "using more qualitative data," instead of basing decisions solely on state standardized test scores. Chris, the former middle school principal, admitted: "So we did a lot of experimenting in an effort to get a great cross-section of kids in those honors classes. Like I said, what was extremely exciting about it was the success rate and the realization that without doing that, those kids would never have had the opportunity." What is also promising is that those students have the background and can handle the rigor and expectations of high school Honors classes, which they did not necessarily have before. Chris commented that this process was successful and did not result in parent backlash because they were adding Honors classes, and not taking seats away from white students.

In positive ways, the district is attempting to level the playing field in the early years so all students are given the opportunity to get into the Honors and AP courses when they get to middle school and high school. In 2015, with the arrival of a new superintendent and a revamping of programs, the process for elementary school G&T admission was changed to be more equitable by testing all fourth and fifth grade children, using multiple measures for G&T identification, and expanding the program to include the top 3–5 percent of all ethnic groups. The district also implemented a grade 2–5 schoolwide enrichment Quest program for all students.

Elementary school administrators also recently switched from homogeneous to heterogeneous grouping in math because they realized that the top groups had a majority of white students and the research literature pointed to the academic benefits of mixed groups. An elementary school principal that we interviewed, named Cindy, reported that there was some "concern from white parents—that if our kids are all going to be mixed

together for math, is that going to affect my student's learning in a negative way? We said no." Cindy said, "It's been a slow but steady movement in the direction of everybody should be together." Another benefit of diversity in the classrooms and programs, according to Cindy, is the cross-ethnic and cross-socioeconomic friendships that are formed.

Currently, however, high-level courses, particularly AP classes, remain majority white in Morristown High School. Teachers and administrators, though, are noticing a "recent push to try to get some kids to upper level courses" through the efforts at the elementary and middle schools and the academic support counselors. We also heard that the AP Board is sending letters to the teachers saying, "You need to get out there and get the minority students taking your courses." In fact, one AP teacher said that in the past she would only have one student of color in her class, and now out of fifteen students, five to seven students are black or Hispanic. She said, "My Honors level class is much more diverse than it ever was. My AP? We're getting better, but there's still definitely a chasm there."

## The Growing and Diverse Hispanic Population

As the quantitative data show, the largest achievement gaps in the district are for Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, and ELL students, substantially overlapping groupings in the MSD. This mirrors national trends of Hispanic students' "consistent pattern of underachievement" because many U.S. schools are not prepared to adequately address their needs.<sup>29</sup> We heard through our qualitative interviews that there are several reasons for the under-achievement of low-income, Hispanic and ELL students in Morris. First, we got a sense that the district was slow to respond to the explosive growth of the Hispanic population and was not willing to "invest" enough resources to meet their needs. Second, according to respondents, in the early 2000s, the Hispanic population started to grow and diversify in terms of native language, dialect, socioeconomics and home country. Thus, it was not just

that students were deficient in language skills, but more recent arrivals also came with very little prior education and a host of social-emotional issues resulting from traumatic experiences in their home countries.

While the Hispanic student population before 2000 consisted primarily of South Americans with higher levels of formal education, after 2000 Central American children with little or no formal education started immigrating from Honduras and Guatemala. As a result, most of these second-wave Central American immigrants are far behind their peers educationally. Not only that, but some are illiterate in reading and writing in their first language. Many need their socio-emotional and basic needs met first to support the academics.

To illustrate the first point about the district's slow response to the Hispanic influx, a former principal who was working at MSD during the start of this population shift recalled her experience with trying to get resources for the Hispanic students:

For the school to meet [the different] needs [of Hispanic students], it's going to take money. . . . You have to be willing to invest in what's needed for the population that's there. I couldn't get any of that stuff. We couldn't go there. But that was one of the things I did. I find that kids for the most part, whether there's a language barrier or not, they know that you care about them or not and they know whether they're being treated fairly or not. . . . I didn't really do a whole lot but just try to meet them where they were at as much as possible.

Trying to meet Hispanic students "where they were at" has been a struggle for the district because students are coming from different backgrounds and entering at different grade levels. There is no one-size-fits-all model.

At the elementary school level, we heard how different schools receive different populations of Hispanic

students based on their neighborhood compositions, which affects standardized test scores, resources, and reputation. A district administrator named Terry described Thomas Jefferson, one of the grade 3–5 schools, as a high-achieving school because they have more of a balance of Hispanic ethnicities and socioeconomic levels compared to the other schools. She explained:

Within our Hispanic community, there is just such a vast, vast difference just school to school, part of town to part of town. We see such a shift. For example, Thomas Jefferson School. They are such a high-performing school, but they're equally—they're balanced ethnicity wise and—we always talk as principals. The principal at TJ will say, 'Right, because the people who move into the TJ area are a different ethnicity within the Hispanic culture. They're here and they're buying houses. They're not coming with part of a family this week, living in an apartment above a store. That really makes a difference for the schools.'

Terry made the point that it is important for principals and teachers to understand that the Hispanic population is diverse; therefore, “teaching has to be different” to meet the specific needs of the different groups.

An example of this is at the high school level where the district just initiated a Limited English Proficient (LEP) Academy for entering LEP students. Terry explained that there is a “map of classes” that students will be tracked into depending on their age and language skills. At first, their schedule will be mostly academic courses with intensive ESL/bilingual support so if they “age out then we're actually creating a GED program through our community school that we'll kind of veer those students into... so that the GED is even feasible for them.”

According to high school students and teachers that we spoke with, the Hispanic students are segregated within

the high school—both in the ESL/Bilingual classes and in lunchrooms and hallways because of self-segregation and communication issues. This makes it difficult to form cross-ethnic friendships or to have Hispanic students fully incorporated into the school. During the student focus group with black students, when asked about the increased presence of Hispanic students, one student responded, “I mean, there are exceptions to this, but all the Hispanics can't really speak English well. They all hang in one area of the school and no one's really making those connections with them.” Another black student in the group agreed and said that no one really tries to connect with the Hispanic students to get them into the community, particularly the students who just immigrated here at the high school level. He said he's witnessed teachers who have Hispanic students in their class and “don't take time to help them” and ultimately the students fail. This student concluded: “I've seen teachers fail kids who do not speak English simply for the fact that they could not complete the assignment, and there are no translators. It's just really not an issue that's been talked about, but that needs to be I think.” The black students thought the district could be doing more to “meet them halfway” by hiring more translators and bilingual staff to communicate with Hispanic parents and students.

Hispanic students in the focus group said similar things about the way teachers “judge” Spanish-speaking students because they cannot speak English well. One student believed that the group of students who just came to the United States is “slighted even more than we are. We speak English. . . . I mean sometimes a teacher can't really help them.” Hispanic students whose first language is not English are well aware of the lowered expectations placed upon them as immigrants and non-English native speakers. As one Hispanic student stated:

I'm not expected to succeed because of my background, because of my—both of my parents came over here from poor countries and really, really started at the bottom. Fortunately,

I was given this opportunity where I can climb the social ladder and I can climb this, but I'm not expected to. I'm not given the same expectations you are simply because the color of my skin or simply because of my background, you know what I mean?

This added barrier that Hispanic immigrant students face is not lost on white students. In our focus group, white students expressed concern that the bilingual educational system fosters a separation between ELL and mainstream students early on and leads to ELL students self-segregating in other areas of their lives. They also are cut off from social networks and the educational expectations and aspirations of mainstream students. One student explained, "I do think we are making a mistake by segregating and keeping all of the Spanish speakers in one classroom from kindergarten, but at the same time we need to make the effort to understand them the same way they need to make the effort to understand us."

This common high school practice of segregating ELL students in what has been called the "ELL ghetto" "reduces access to knowledge" because students are unable to "complete prerequisites for higher tracks or college."<sup>30</sup> Respondents were hopeful that the district could provide a more inclusive learning environment across classrooms in the future.

## Catering to White Families

While there is movement toward integration at the classroom level, there is also still a perception that the parents with the most power in the system, namely white parents, are advocating for their children to get into G&T, AP, and the highly sought after STEM Academy. As many respondents told us, there is a still a sense that, in order to attract white families to the public schools, MSD must cater to them through the use of tracking and ability grouping.

Our interview data suggest that in order to stem white

flight to the private schools, there apparently is a belief that the district needs to create special, elite courses and programs for the children of those families. As one black mother said, "when you take a look behind the curtain" within the school, tracking students into separate classes is problematic when it results in segregated G&T programs at the elementary level and segregated tracks at the middle and high school levels. This is the case because, as we see in other racially diverse desegregated schools, white Morris parents are more likely to push and advocate for their children's educational placements, and teachers and parents are the gatekeepers for admission.

Richard explained that people love to say how the diversity in the community was the main reason that they moved to Morristown. However, what "they"—white stakeholders—have been "reluctant to say is, 'We've got a challenge here. We can't get our minority parents out to have dialogue with us as board members, as administrators, as teachers and principals to kind of outline the disparity between their kids and other people's kids.'" He lamented the fact that nobody is asking whether the district is losing talented black students to private schools, which he thinks is the case, because middle-class black parents are disgruntled about the achievement gap.

We also heard from black parents that, even when their children get high test scores and grades, they are not always placed in, or encouraged to take, Honors or AP classes. They said they have to "fight" extra hard to get their children into the higher level courses, which they believe has to do with racial bias and teachers' lower expectations and support for students of color. Students also have to have the background knowledge and experience of taking more advanced courses to succeed, so parents of color really stressed that early intervention would have been beneficial for their children.

The correlation between race and track at the high school is not lost on the students. One white student,

John, expressed concern about how this gap in access to educational rigor impacts recognition of students' achievements stating:

[W]e were at the National Honors Society induction last night and in my grade out of 150 kids there were sixty inducted and I think there were two black kids and one Spanish [kid] out of sixty. I honestly just think it's because [of] the difference in opportunities. I don't know if that's socioeconomic but that's just—they're not getting the opportunity to excel in the class that they're in. It's sad to see. We're all up on stage. It's easy to see. It's the first thing that stands out. Not being racist at all, it's just if you look at the stage you'll see that there's fifty-seven white kids there out of sixty.

Minority students also expressed a desire for more support from teachers. As one black student named Eric remarked:

I feel that as if since we've been in school, race has always been a really taboo topic so no one likes to talk about the fact that minority students don't have as many outlets and they don't have the support systems that a lot of white students have. So we don't have—not every minority student comes from a two-parent household. A lot of our minority students immigrated here by themselves with no parents, so they don't have the same resources, and that's where things kind of get lost because we don't talk about what other people have to deal with and then we don't see that these kids need extra help. It's not that they're not capable of doing it. They just don't have the resources.

Administrators also felt that they need to “set the bar higher in the A-level courses” and offer professional development in differentiation. Each group noted the lack of student diversity in AP and Honors courses and maintained that this practice needs to change.

However, they also felt increasing the number of minority teachers in the school was key to creating such support, since 86 percent of teachers in the district are white. The black student focus group specifically mentioned using affirmative action practices in the teacher and administrator-hiring process while Hispanic students said more teachers fluent in Spanish are needed. Furthermore, black students believed that a more inclusive curriculum that addresses race is necessary for achieving a well-integrated school, and some teachers also advocated for teacher sensitivity training. One study reports that: “Interacting with different races at school helps students address their implicit and explicit biases about other racial groups, while promoting intergroup understanding and reducing prejudice.”<sup>31</sup>

All of the changes requested above would move the district closer to the integration side of the desegregation/integration continuum, which district officials are eager to do. In fact, there is an incredible “can do” attitude among respondents, along with a sense that whatever challenge comes up within the Morris district it will be addressed and overcome.

## The Benefits and Challenges of School Diversity

Time and time again, we heard from respondents about how much desegregated schooling at MSD benefits students, in terms of their future educational opportunities and careers. In fact, there is a large body of literature that shows the academic and social benefits of school desegregation.<sup>32</sup> There is also a sense of pride that comes with choosing diversity and what the district can provide to at-risk students. Patty, a white former student and current parent in the district, gave her philosophical view of the collective benefits that diversity brings to the district:

It's unbelievable, the things you hear. I mean, we have students here who are homeless. I would never have thought that. But I think it's

funny—as a parent when I hear stories like that, I don’t think, “Oh, what’s happening at Morristown?” I think, “Oh good, they’re here. That’ll be good for them.” You know what I mean? It’ll be good for our student body, our experience and the system in Morristown High overall. They’ll get them what they need. They’ll provide whatever they can. So I actually feel proud of that, you know?

This moral commitment to diversity and the collective benefits to students and the larger community permeated the interviews. White alumni from Morris, like Patty, were also very appreciative of what the exposure to diversity afforded them in the long term. They spoke about the positive impact that diversity has had on their lives, not only in terms of college and career trajectories, but also in terms of the social aspects. Another testament to the district’s success is that there are many teachers and administrators who graduated from Morris and came back to raise their families and work in the schools because of the diversity.

Lonna, a white alumna, said that she has “enormous pride” in the district. She said that she did not appreciate the racial and socioeconomic diversity in the schools until she left Morristown and came back to raise her own children: “Here I was always exposed to different people and different things and in other places, people aren’t. So I always say that it’s a great place to grow up because of all of the diversity. . . . I tell people you come out of here feeling confident. You’re not as frightened.” Additionally, the diverse groups of students in the focus groups agreed that their high school was preparing them for the “real world” as compared to the all-white suburban districts surrounding Morris, where they said students can be “ignorant” about these issues because they are not exposed to diversity.

In sum, even with the challenges that diversity brings, overall, current and former Morristown students, parents, community members, and educators strongly believe that the merger was the best possible outcome

for MSD. When asked how he would rate the merger on a scale of 1 to 10, a former white district administrator who was present during the merger said he would rate it a “12” because it was an “epiphany that we are part of something great.”

## Conclusion

The Morris School District has been a remarkable, if incomplete, success story. It has achieved and maintained diversity at the school district and school building levels, but, in common with other diverse districts around the country, it is still confronting the challenge of extending that diversity to the classroom, course, and program level.

The overriding purpose of merging the Morristown and Morris Township school districts in 1971 was to forestall yet another New Jersey urban-suburban, black-white schism. Strikingly, it is the only school district in New Jersey—and the nation—to have been created by that mechanism. From early on, and throughout its forty-five-year history, the Morris district has succeeded admirably in meeting the goal of maintaining diversity and togetherness, rather than segregation and isolation, despite a number of potentially disruptive developments.

For example, just a few years after the merger, Morristown High School experienced what was widely reported as a “race riot.” Although those we interviewed who were at the school at the time have quite different impressions about the event, it was serious enough to result in the high school being closed for a week and police from dozens of adjoining communities being on call. If anything could have triggered the massive white flight from the Morris district that merger opponents had predicted, that should have done it—but it never did. White enrollment in the district has never fallen below 50 percent, and it is currently about 52 percent, significantly higher than the statewide percentage of about 48 percent.

More recently, the district has had to contend (as has the state at large) with a huge demographic shift in the pupil population, as the white and black percentages have declined and the Hispanic and Asian percentages have grown. The Morris district reflects that challenge to an even greater extent than the state as a whole. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when merger was the dominant educational issue in Morristown and Morris Township, the demographic profile was overwhelmingly black and white. The more urbanized Morristown had a substantial and growing black population, many of them long-time residents; the more suburban Morris Township was a predominantly white and rapidly growing community. There also were significant socioeconomic differences with Morris Township residents having much higher income levels than Morristown residents.

Now the picture is far different. Although the Morris district's white pupil population has declined somewhat over recent years, it is still at 52 percent. Meanwhile, the black population has declined to barely more than 10 percent. Although the Asian population has grown modestly, the big demographic change is the rapid growth of the Hispanic population. It now constitutes about 32 percent of the district's students, and over recent years the influx has been heavily of low-income Central American students, many of whom have not had the benefit of substantial formal education in their home countries. The educational and social challenges for the Morris district are obvious.

The Morris district's student assignment policies have succeeded very well. As this report highlights, for black students the dissimilarity index for elementary school is at just 2.6, meaning that only about 2.6 percent of white or black students would have to change schools for elementary school-level diversity to perfectly match districtwide diversity. For white and Hispanic students, the dissimilarity index is just above 4 percent, still an impressive accomplishment. To appreciate how impressive this school-level diversity is, it is necessary to recognize that the dissimilarity indexes for the neighborhoods these schools draw from are above

40 percent, indicating that a large portion of the population would need to move neighborhoods to achieve residential integration that matches the school-level integration.

As this report also indicates, the Morris district still has major work to do in extending student diversity within schools to classrooms, courses, and programs. At both ends of the spectrum—classes for the gifted and talented, honors and AP courses, and other high-level courses and programs, on the one hand, and special education classifications and disciplinary actions, at the other—the Morris district's record is not nearly so exemplary. The achievement of what many researchers refer to as “true integration” is still a goal, and a seemingly elusive one sometimes. Still, the district and its new superintendent recently have committed themselves to a plan designed to improve the within-school record and we expect to monitor the success of their efforts over the rest of the Morris project.

## Reasons for Success

What explains the Morris district's success in achieving and maintaining diversity at the district and school levels? Our study has identified a number of factors based on our extensive interviewing and use of focus groups and other research, but admittedly these fall well short of demonstrable causal explanations.

One success factor is the long and deep connection between Morristown and Morris Township, which resulted in many residents of both communities expressing the view that, in practical effect, they were a single community. This reality was influential in the New Jersey Supreme Court's 1971 *Jenkins* decision that paved the way for the commissioner's merger order later that year. It also undoubtedly has helped the educational merger to overcome some rough patches.

A second factor is a belief that these communities have a critical mass of longtime residents who are committed to doing the “right thing” and who believe that diversity

in education and in the broader community is the right thing. That group has been augmented by more recent residents who have moved into Morristown and Morris Township because of diversity.

But the reason for MSD's success goes beyond a critical mass of those who support diversity. In our extensive interactions with a broad cross-section of the community through interviews and focus groups, we literally did not encounter a single person who thought that the merger was a bad idea and that educational opportunities would have been better had the districts been permitted to go their separate ways. And that included people who were critical of the district, even people who had chosen to withdraw their own children from the Morris district schools because they felt they were not being appropriately educated. Even those people were generally supportive of the merger and of the educational system that resulted.

Connected to this unusual level of community support for making diversity work is the substantial and longstanding presence in Morristown of very active civic, social service, and religious organizations that provide important support services for low-income and immigrant residents, including those related to education. This social context creates a supportive community climate for diversity.

Additionally, there seems to be a particularly well-developed and clearly articulated awareness of the relationship between the success of the schools and of the broader community. That Morristown has become in recent years a “happening” place with its cultural, culinary, and social venues—in the parlance of many, “Hoboken West”—has not been lost on those we have interviewed.

Yet another factor is the impressively upbeat attitude of teachers and administrators in the school district. They radiate a can-do attitude in the face of challenges that could overwhelm them. The fact that a surprising number of those teachers and administrators were

themselves products of the Morris School District may well contribute to that attitude.

Finally, the district has the advantage of generous educational resources. Not only is its per pupil spending at the high end of a state that spends a great deal on education, but the district has had the benefit of substantial private support through the impressive Morris Educational Foundation, private foundations, and individual donors. Almost without exception, the people we interviewed and interacted with in focus groups thought that the district had sufficient resources to meet its challenges. The only possible exception has to do with the district's recent response to the large influx of low-income Hispanic students from Central America about which some respondents asserted that the district had not directed enough resources to the problem quickly enough.

One other factor characterizes the creation and continued operation of the Morris district, and it is difficult to know how to evaluate it. To a surprising degree, the Morris district has remained below the radar. It's not clear that has resulted from conscious policy or practice, but perhaps it has afforded the Morris district flexibility it would not have had if it were more widely known. (Of course, if that's the case, this study will blow its cover.)

All of that is not to say that the Morris district has achieved educational nirvana. It continues to confront massive challenges, not always in the most effective or successful way. As indicated in this report, diversity has not been fully implemented at the school level, either in terms of curriculum or other formal school programs, or regarding informal interactions among students. Starting in middle schools, students begin to engage

in substantial self-segregation. Student outcomes are mixed with the district's white and black students doing relatively better than its Hispanic, English Language Learner, and low-income students when compared to

other districts. In fact, the district has not settled on the most effective way to teach its increasing population of ELL students. Also, the teaching and administrative staffs are not nearly as diverse as the student population, a constant source of concern.

Finally, some respondents identified as a weakness what others saw as a strength—that, on the whole, the district and the broader community have dealt with the challenges of diversity in a strikingly civil, even collegial, manner, far different than the tone and atmospherics in most other diverse school districts. Some respondents feared that this was a sign of avoidance not maturity and civility; that unless difficult issues of race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status were addressed head on, perhaps with the emotion, heat and even anger such exchanges can produce, the situation would not improve. The students with whom we interacted in focus groups were especially vocal in expressing the hope that teachers and administrators could find a way to confront these issues with one another and with their students.

## Recommendations for the Morris District

The recommendations follow closely the prior recitation of problems. Among the most common recommendations we received from our interviews and focus groups were:

- + diversify the teaching and administrative staffs;
- + provide more effective ELL instruction;
- + provide more and better early childhood education, especially for at-risk students;
- + improve outreach to Hispanic parents and other caregivers;

- + sensitize teachers to cultural differences among their students and ensure that teachers don't underestimate, perhaps unconsciously, the educational potential of students of color;

- + find constructive ways for the schools and the broader community to address honestly and openly the complex issues confronted by diverse school districts;

- + develop and implement strategies to have higher-level courses and programs, as well as special education classifications and those who run afoul of disciplinary policies, reflect the diversity of the district and school; and

- + create more opportunities for cross-cultural exchange by offering multicultural curricular offerings and programs to reduce implicit biases and foster an inclusive school culture.

In addition, the district should closely monitor the success, and potential challenges, of the new superintendent's blended learning initiative, which places great weight on individualized computer-based guided learning approaches.

## An Action Plan for New Jersey

This report is not meant to be just a detailed study of the Morris District, its unique genesis and history, and its performance and status over its forty-five-year life cycle to date. From the start, the project also has been designed to determine what role the Morris district could play in the statewide reform of New Jersey's educational system, to what extent it might provide a "best practices" model for how the state could restructure its system to make it more "efficient" and effective, especially with regard to satisfying the state constitution's racial balance or diversity mandate.

To provide a brief context, at the heart of the state's education clause is the concept of an "efficient system of free public schools."<sup>33</sup> Given how much New Jersey spends on public education and how high its property taxes are, it should come as no surprise that a succession of blue ribbon commissions over about fifty years have looked into the issue, often with a special focus on the state's crazy quilt of more than six hundred school districts, two-thirds of them too small to operate a full K–12 educational program. Most of the reports wound up recommending wholesale consolidation or merger of school districts.

Among the most common recommendations were that all districts should be K–12 and should have a minimum pupil population (3,500 was the recommendation of one report). A relatively recent statute built upon such recommendations by requiring the newly empowered executive county superintendents of schools to develop plans for consolidating school districts within their counties. Unfortunately, nothing much has happened pursuant to that mandate. In fact, only one school district merger has occurred in New Jersey during the past several decades, which involved four tiny Hunterdon county districts, one a regional high school district and the other three elementary districts. The merger took several years of planning, negotiation and referenda pursuant to New Jersey's voluntary merger law. It resulted in a single K–12 district, but with less than 1,000 students in total. The fact that the four districts were all quite homogeneous and similar to one another undoubtedly facilitated the voluntary merger.

The Morris district's creation by merger suggests another route—mandatory rather than voluntary merger. The voluntary route in its current form seems highly unlikely to be used by many districts. And the truth is that the mandatory route has not been used since the Morris district was created in 1971. That suggests New Jersey simply has not been amenable to district consolidation no matter what form it takes. But that may change both because of increasingly intense fiscal concerns in the state and because of renewed

recent attention to the extent of racial segregation in New Jersey's schools. The creation of the Morris district sought to respond to both dimensions.

## The Morris District as a Best Practices Model

If the Morris district were to be considered a best practices model, two possible applications are for: (1) regionalizing appropriate and feasible clusters of school districts throughout the state; and (2) moving to a statewide system of countywide or other regional school districts.

### Regionalization of Appropriate and Feasible Clusters of School Districts

The Morris district, as a best practices model, might suggest that the state can begin rationalizing its school district structure by identifying clusters of school districts where merger is feasible and could satisfy educational, management, fiscal, and diversity ends. Incidentally, the educational benefits might sound arcane, but they can be substantial. One is often referred to as "curriculum articulation." That relates to the continuity of curriculum and instruction throughout a student's educational experience. Having one K–12 district responsible for a student's entire public education obviously is more likely to lead to continuity than having multiple districts responsible, especially if those districts are under no compulsion to cooperate with one another.

Another educational benefit, especially at the high school level, is the richness of the curriculum, in terms of the availability of specialized courses and of AP and Honors-level classes. Below a certain threshold of student population, such richness is simply unavailable.

Finally, decades of research support the educational benefits of diversity to all students, white as well as black and Hispanic, upper-income as well as lower income.

The diversity benefits of this approach would be very dependent, however, upon the particulars of the district cluster and especially the extent to which they are identified, not based on pre-existing relationships or perceived compatibility, but on their diversity. That is likely to be where a big difference arises between voluntary and mandatory regionalization.

The Education Law Center has already begun to identify promising school district clusters for this purpose. It is likely, however, that it will be a special challenge for such an approach to deal with deeply segregated large urban districts, such as Newark. For a district of that size to become part of a district cluster that provides meaningful diversity would require the addition of a considerable number of predominantly white nearby districts. The resulting district would be substantially larger in geographic area and pupil population than New Jersey is accustomed to (although probably not nearly as large as a countywide district). An alternative would be to divide up large urban districts and combine segments of them with nearby districts.

The risk of this district cluster approach, though, is that, while it might achieve some improvements in the state's diversity picture, it would stop well short of thoroughgoing statewide reform. Since being able to attend a racially balanced school whenever that is feasible has been identified as a constitutional right in New Jersey, the district cluster approach might leave many New Jersey students with a right without a remedy.

## Countywide or Other Regional Consolidations

There are ways in which broader-scale reform might be achieved. One is through moving from a system based on local, municipally contiguous school districts to a system of countywide or other regional districts. This likely would be done not through consolidation of existing school districts, but through a statutory restructuring of the entire public education delivery system.

The education systems of about a third of the states already operate on a county district basis, and other states use counties and other regional configurations for specialized educational purposes, such as the delivery of special educational services to disabled students. Perhaps the most common use of counties for specialized educational purposes is for the delivery of vocational education. New Jersey is one of the states that use such an approach. Since county vocational districts in New Jersey and some other states began to operate high-tech magnet schools between twelve and fifteen years ago, in addition to more traditional vocational programs, they have demonstrated one of the benefits of drawing students from a countywide catchment area—a large enough number of students with specialized interests can be aggregated to populate entire schools. Of course, the most academically successful of these countywide magnet schools require that students test their way in, and this has tended to limit the diversity benefits. But researchers such as Gary Orfield at UCLA's Civil Rights Project have long been touting magnet schools with an explicit diversity component as a promising reform.

Since student populations of counties tend to be much more diverse than those of individual school districts, especially districts as small as many of New Jersey's, countywide districts begin to open up promising diversity possibilities, whether implemented through magnet schools, or the crafting of attendance zones, or both. Of course, even within a diverse countywide school district, the diversity of individual schools would depend upon the attendance policies adopted and put into practice. So adopting a county district system enhances the potential for school diversity assuming students within each county can be assigned in a manner that results in diverse schools. Here's where the Morris district may serve as a best practices model. Obviously, the logistical challenges of assigning students in a countywide district to achieve diverse schools are more formidable than in a modest-sized district such as Morris, but some of the policies and practices may still have application.

Moving from a highly localized education system such as New Jersey's to a county system seems like a real stretch, politically and otherwise. Perhaps it is, but that doesn't mean it's unachievable. On June 15, 2016, the Educational Testing Service and the Education Law Center jointly sponsored a day-long conference on *Bringing Students Together: The Obstacles & Opportunities of School District Consolidation*. During the conference's final session on *Moving the Agenda Forward: Legislative Obstacles and Opportunities*, a New Jersey state senator, Bob Smith, pledged that, as soon as a new governor is in office, he would reintroduce a bill to authorize referenda across the state about moving to a system of countywide school districts.

In this last section of the report, the concrete ways in which the Morris district might serve as a best practices model for statewide reform seem limited, but that ignores the district's more symbolic, even inspirational, lessons. The Morris district has proven over forty-five years that a diverse community can find ways to support diverse schools, notwithstanding formidable challenges. As New Jersey becomes an ever more diverse statewide community, perhaps that lesson can take hold far more broadly.

As that suggests, changing public attitudes and creating grassroots support is essential if meaningful statewide reform is to happen and persist. As they always have been, the mechanisms for effectuating that reform are legislative, executive and, ultimately, judicial. A successful plan of action must proceed on all those fronts through a carefully calibrated strategy. The dramatic story of the Morris School District can inspire such an effort.

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## The Morris Project

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## Notes

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