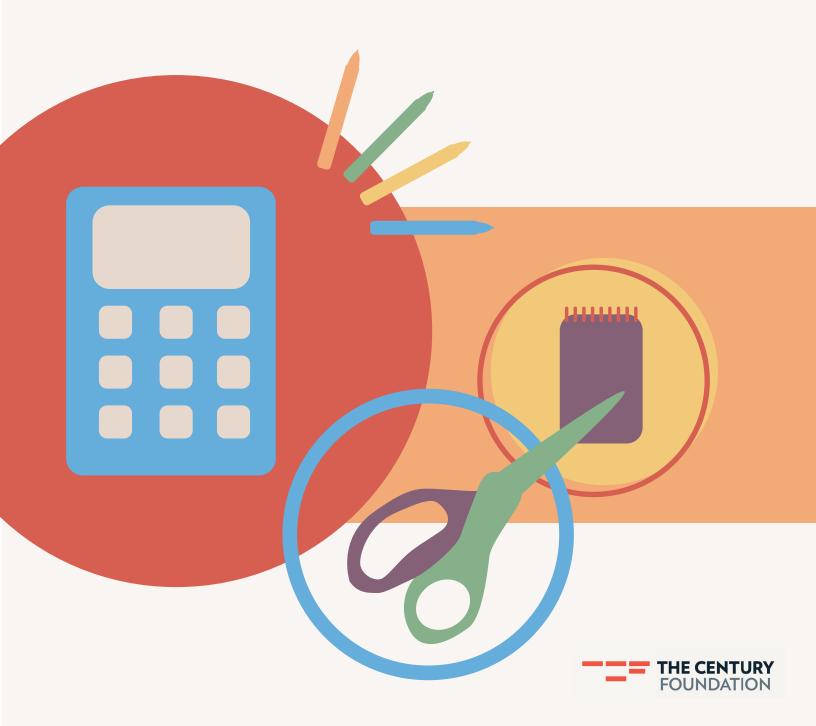
Integrating Classrooms and Reducing Academic Tracking

Strategies for School and District Leaders

HALLEY POTTER



Introduction

Enrolling a diverse group of students is only the first step in the creation of an integrated learning environment. In order to harness the full set of academic, social, and civic benefits that racially and economically mixed settings have been shown to offer, schools with diverse student bodies should also have integrated classrooms. Even at schools with diverse enrollment, though, this is not always the case: academic tracking can create situations in which students that are siloed along lines of race and class.

Academic tracking—and the racial and socioeconomic segregation it often creates—raises a number of concerns about equity. First, academic tracking and other forms of homogeneous ability grouping such as gifted programs frequently do a poor job at the main goal they are designed to achieve: sorting students by ability. Research suggests that, aside from their academic preparedness and ability, students' degree of privilege³—in the form of families' resources, access to test prep, and social capital, as well as the implicit biases of staff and teachers-may come into play.4 Second, data shows that academic tracking harms students assigned to lower tracks, who show reduced achievement and increased gaps over time as compared with peers with similar initial achievement assigned to the higher-level courses.⁵ Third, when classrooms are skewed by race and class, students are robbed of some of the peer interactions and access to social networks that diversity can provide. Finally, when rich and poor students, white students and students of color, are by and large in different academic programs, the equalizing power of integration—which helps to promote equitable distribution of resources—is weakened.

By contrast, when differentiation in integrated classrooms is done well, it is possible to reduce the achievement gap while maintaining or increasing the performance of all student subgroups. In these settings, all students have access to a challenging curriculum, and the instructional methods, not the standards, are differentiated to meet students' needs. Building from TCF's extensive research on district and charter schools that are committed to integration, this toolkit is designed as a resource for teachers, school administrators, and district leaders interested in reducing segregation among classrooms within a school—whether those divides fall along academic, racial, or class lines—and exploring new ways to meet the needs of all students within integrated settings.

This toolkit focuses on three strategies for promoting integrated classrooms within a school: schoolwide enrichment, open/embedded honors, and diversifying Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) enrollment. Schoolwide enrichment can be used in all grades, while open honors and diversifying AP/IB apply mainly to high schools. Each of these strategies requires tailoring a general approach to the specific school setting; as such, there is not a step-by-step recipe for implementation of any of these approaches. Rather, each section gives an overview of the strategy, highlights specific examples of schools that are using the strategy, and focuses on the steps that school and district leaders can take to begin work in this area.

This toolkit can be found online at https://tcf.org/content/report/integrating-classrooms-reducing-academic-tracking-strategies-school-leaders-educators/

Schoolwide Enrichment

Research shows that gifted education can be a driver of segregation both within and between schools. Middle-class, white, and Asian students are more likely than low-income, black, and Latinx students to be identified as gifted and participate in gifted education programs.¹⁰ In some districts, students identified as gifted are assigned to classrooms apart from their general education peers, or are enrolled in separate schools that have special admissions requirements—practices which lead not only to a separation of students based on achievement levels but also to geographic stratification that mirrors racial and socioeconomic segregation. Implementing more equitable gifted identification processes that rely on multiple forms of assessment, delay testing until later grades, and screen all students in a district can help to narrow racial and socioeconomic gaps. 11 However, another approach to addressing these gaps is to rethink who gets access to gifted education in the first place. The principles of gifted education—a focus on students' talents and interests, individualized opportunities for advanced instruction, expanded curricula, rigor, and an encouragement of creativity—can also be excellent tools for differentiating instruction within integrated settings.

The Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM), developed by University of Connecticut professors Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis, is an approach to teaching and learning that draws from the pedagogy of gifted education to enhance opportunities to all students in a school. SEM identifies "gifted behaviors," including above-average academic abilities creativity, and task commitment, rather than attaching a binary ("gifted"/"not gifted") label. SEM uses flexible student groupings that change throughout the course of a year and bring together students with different achievement and interest levels. It creates opportunities for all students to be engaged in some type of enrichment, in which students with shared interests engage in investigative learning and explore real-life problems.

The following three examples show how schools have used SEM (or similar methods of enrichment for all) to meet the needs of all learners within heterogeneous student groupings. District of Columbia Public Schools has implemented SEM in twelve of its existing elementary and middle schools. BELL Academy and Veritas Academy, located in Queens, New York, are SEM schools that have used this model since their

opening. And City Neighbors Charter School in Baltimore, Maryland uses an academic enrichment and support model of its own creation, called "intensive learning periods," that shares some characteristics with SEM.

District of Columbia Public Schools

District of Columbia Public Schools began their SEM program in 2012 as part of an effort to revitalize middle schools and encourage more parents to keep their children in district schools after elementary school. District leaders heard from parents that they wanted more opportunities to challenge advanced students; however, DCPS ruled out a traditional gifted and talented program, fearing that it might exacerbate inequity. SEM offered the opportunity to provide enrichment that would reach all students—while strengthening schools' overall instruction.

DCPS began by implementing SEM in two middle schools and one K–12 school, and the program has grown to include 12 middle and elementary schools. There are currently two staff members at the district level charged with supporting SEM. Ten of the SEM schools have at least one full-time SEM resource teacher. These positions are funded by the district in six of the schools (which have been selected by the district to use the program), and by individual schools' discretionary budgets in the other four schools, which chose to implement SEM. Two additional schools have opted into SEM by forming SEM committees made up of teachers and staff in lieu of a full-time SEM position. The district also offers monthly professional development for SEM teachers and sends teams of teachers and administrators to a weeklong training program every summer.¹²

In these SEM schools, enrichment for students ranges from small pull-out groups to whole-school programs. Schools group students for enrichment based on their interests, which they determine using student surveys and teacher observations. SEM teachers then facilitate enrichment for clusters of students who share a broad common interest—such as math, athletics, or social action—guiding students in developing specific topics and projects to undertake within that umbrella theme. One group of students might write creative stories about superheroes, for instance, while another group builds electrical circuits.¹³ Although the groups are organized around a shared interest, they are heterogeneous in terms of ability, and creative lesson designs allow students to bring individual strengths and

interests to shared group projects. Some of the students in an enrichment group might show high ability in the targeted area, whereas others might show deep interest or creativity.

At the elementary school level, this enrichment often happens by having the SEM teacher pull students out of their classrooms; at the middle school level, students may have an enrichment period as part of their schedule for one or more quarters per year. Schools at which all enrichment clusters are led by a SEM teacher typically set a goal of having at least 40 percent of students participate in enrichment over course of a year. (Some schools set that goal as high as 100 percent.)

Other schools achieve 100 percent participation by holding schoolwide enrichment clusters, times when all students in the school participate in enrichment concurrently, taught by a range of teachers and staff. The enrichment clusters are popular: administrators at one SEM school have noticed that student attendance rates go up on schoolwide cluster days, and total enrollment has increased across the district's SEM middle schools over the past few years.¹⁴

BELL Academy and Veritas Academy

In Queens, New York, two recently founded public schools use SEM as a core part of their approaches: BELL Academy, a middle school that opened in 2007, and Veritas Academy, a high school that opened in 2013.

All students at these schools participate in enrichment clusters—which at BELL happen concurrently during a schoolwide enrichment cluster block and at Veritas are scheduled throughout the day as electives. The schools develop the topics for enrichment clusters by asking staff—including teachers, administrators, social workers, community resource persons, and other staff—about skills, experiences, or hobbies they have that could form the basis of a cluster, and then matching those with student interests. Cheryl Quatrano, one of the co-founders of both schools, emphasizes three important elements for successful enrichment clusters:

 Student voice in shaping topics and projects. In Quatrano's words, "students [should be] writing curriculum with their teachers."

- A culminating product that gives back to the community. For example, students in one school's photography enrichment cluster decided to sell notecards featuring their photographs. They used the profits to purchase a camera, which they donated to a children's hospital for young patients to use.
- Ways for all students to contribute. "It creates equity and access for all—students with disabilities, ESL students, struggling students, [and] advanced students," Quatrano explains.

At BELL and Veritas, teachers are also trained to infuse SEM methods into the regular curriculum to help them differentiate instruction. In order to challenge and engage students at appropriate levels, both schools' teachers keep student interests (compiled through surveys) and academic assessment data in mind. Teachers use an online database to find individualized reading materials that match each student's reading level and topics of interest.

City Neighbors Charter School

City Neighbors Charter School, a K–8 school in Baltimore, Maryland, has developed its own instructional program that, like SEM, uses the pedagogy of enrichment combined with flexible student groupings to meet the needs of all learners. The middle school grades at City Neighbors have smallgroup "intensive learning periods" that provide all students with a combination of enrichment and support. Each morning, middle schoolers have a forty-five minute period in which teachers and other staff lead targeted instruction. The topics vary according to students' needs and interests: some students might have an intensive learning period in which they extend their science instruction by building robots, for instance, while others are receiving extra writing support by working with a local playwright.

The intensive learning periods help achieve the goal of differentiation within an integrated classroom in two ways. First, these daily small-group sessions provide an opportunity to deliver differentiated instruction that helps students to be successful in larger, mixed-ability classes during the rest of the day. Second, the intensive learning periods also frequently group together students from different academic levels and grades by combining a mixture of enrichment and support, assigning students by shared interests and needs, rather than strictly by academic ability. For example,

one intensive learning period on science writing brought together students who had an interest in science but who could benefit from extra support with nonfiction writing. In a psychology intensive, a group of students, including many with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), conducted research on their own sleep and hunger patterns and met with researchers studying Alzheimer's disease and memory loss—thereby combining math practice with the development of complex inquiry skills.

Intensives have been so successful in providing a way to respond to students' needs in a differentiated manner that City Neighbors has added them in fourth and fifth grade as well.

Strategies for Getting Started on Schoolwide Enrichment

- Build schoolwide enrichment gradually. Using any form of schoolwide enrichment, schools can add elements to their enrichment program gradually. Schools might start by completing student interest profiles and adding enrichment clusters or intensive learning periods in one grade. In subsequent years, school leaders might work with teachers to use the interest profiles and enrichment techniques to enhance core classroom instruction as well as add discrete enrichment periods.
- Integrate enrichment into existing school systems and goals. In order to implement school-wide enrichment, administrators and teachers must be on board with regard to modifying the school schedule and curriculum. For any program to succeed, faculty must see schoolwide enrichment as part of the school's core work and a path toward overall academic and cultural improvement —rather than as an optional addon. Schools can start these conversations by sending teams of teachers to visit schools that are using forms of schoolwide enrichment and by considering how enrichment could help meet some of the specific goals of their schools.
- Share the school's definitions of gifted behavior and enrichment and explain how these inform the school's new enrichment approach. Schools should

- also engage parents to start a dialogue about how school-wide enrichment is different from traditional gifted and talented programs—and what it means to look for strengths, interests, and gifted behaviors in all students, rather than labeling individual students as "gifted" (or "not gifted.")
- Access resources on SEM from the University of Connecticut. The Renzulli Center for Creativity, Gifted Education, and Talent Development at the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut offers a number of free resources on SEM, and also runs a week-long conference each summer for educators from current and aspiring SEM schools.

Open/Embedded Honors

At the high school level, one method of meeting the needs of students at different academic levels within integrated classrooms is to offer an "open honors" or "embedded honors" option. In this model, all students take a class together, but students who choose to may take the class for honors credit by completing extra assignments.

- Heterogeneous classrooms in which students can interact and learn with (and from) a wide range of peers
- The option for students to switch in and out of honors without rearranging their schedule.

Harvest Collegiate High School in New York City and the High Tech High network in San Diego offer two examples of how open honors can work in practice.

Harvest Collegiate High School

Harvest Collegiate is a public high school in New York City that opened in 2012 and currently serves close to 500 students in ninth through twelfth grades who come from a broad range of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Diversity is one of the founding principles of the school; as of this writing, 46 percent of students are Latinx, 24 percent are black, 20 percent are white, 6 percent are Asian, and 4 percent are other races or ethnicities; 65 percent are low-income.¹⁷ High school enrollment in New York City is determined by a city-wide choice process; it is worth noting, however, that while about one-fifth of all public middle and high schools in New York City use some sort of "screen"testing, audition, interview, or attendance requirements—to admit students, ¹⁸ Harvest has no admissions requirements. John McCrann, a math teacher and union chapter leader at the school, explains this approach: "We really believe that people learning together makes the education experience better for everyone." 19

As part of this focus on fostering a diverse learning environment, Harvest has been committed from day one to having heterogeneous classrooms, with "open honors" as part of this model: in this way, all students benefit from learning in diverse classrooms—but also have differentiated academic opportunities.

All classes at Harvest (aside from AP classes) are required to have an Open Honors component. Julia Shube, one of the school's math teachers, coordinates the open honors program. She ensures that teachers receive support developing open honors components for their classes both before the start of and throughout the school year. At the beginning of the year, students can apply for Open Honors in any of their classes—a process which usually consists of writing a short statement about their interest—and they can switch in or out of honors during a month-long add/drop period at the beginning of the course.

Open honors work might include developing math functions to advocate for a public policy that they're interested in, serving as a peer writing tutor for an English class, or researching an additional historical event for a social studies class. Students have the opportunity to capitalize on certain interests as they arise during the school year; for instance, one year, the school supported a group of honors students from several global history classes who decided to host a day-long human rights conference for the whole school. Some courses also provide opportunities for honors students to meet outside of class, such as a book club for honors math honors students which meets periodically over lunch.

About 25 percent of students end up participating in open honors over the course of a given year. School leaders and teachers monitor the enrollment numbers and demographics of students who take advantage of the program—and have intervened when they have noticed participation gaps.

Keeping the workload for teachers manageable is an ongoing challenge of open honors, but teachers see a number of benefits for classroom learning. Honors students are often able to bring the extra material that they have been studying into class discussions, which is enriching for the whole class, and there are also plenty of moments when the insights and perspectives shared by non-honors students are reminders of the ways in which the benefits of diverse classrooms flow in many directions. Social studies and English teacher Steve Lazar also sees Open Honors as a useful marketing tool for continuing to attract a diverse student body: he explains that the program signals to students who might also be considering private or screened schools that Harvest presents opportunities to be challenged.

High Tech High

High Tech High, a charter network with fourteen schools serving students in grades K–12 in San Diego, California, also uses an open honors model. From the start, the network, which has a project-based learning model, has been committed to having integrated classrooms with no academic tracking. School leaders originally implemented an open honors model so that students could earn the weighted grade-point averages that selective colleges look for in applicants.

At High Tech High, the honors option is offered in core academic classes for juniors and seniors, and about 70 percent of students in those grades take at least one honors class each semester. While most classes use an opt-in model, a few make honors enrollment the default and enable students to opt-out; they see this as a means of encouraging more students who might have been unsure about taking on honors work to participate.

Over the course of the past ten years, High Tech High has succeeded in closing and reversing the race-based gap in honors enrollment across its network; that is, black, Latinx, Native American, and Pacific Islander students are now slightly more likely than white and Asian students to be enrolled. However, the network has turned its attention to addressing one gap that has emerged: girls are more likely than boys to be enrolled in honors. Starting this year, network leaders have added honors enrollment as an indicator on their internal dashboard to ensure that it will get sustained attention. ²⁰

Strategies for Getting Started on Open/ Embedded Honors

• Start conversations about the value of diverse classrooms. Getting buy-in from teachers is essential. Kate Burch, the principal of Harvest Collegiate, explains that the open honors approach has been successful at her school because "there's a school culture that normalizes difference and embraces diversity in the classroom." ²¹ Create time for staff conversations about any concerns which may arise from the transition. Lead educators to reflect on how ability

- grouping influenced their own educations (and those of their peers) growing up. Ask teachers to share examples of how students with different academic abilities have benefited each other in the classroom. If possible, facilitate visits at other schools that use embedded honors models.
- Identify planning time for teachers. The biggest resource needed to implement open/embedded honors is teacher planning time. School administrators and department leads should examine how to rearrange planning schedules so that teachers can have the planning time necessary to implement the program well.

 Teachers may also use collective bargaining as a tool to help secure planning time for open honors.
- Start with one team or department. Schools can try
 out open honors by starting with just one class
 or subject. If schools are starting from a position
 of having de-tracked classes, adding an open
 honors component to several classes could begin
 with just a few short meetings (on curriculum
 development and ways to enroll students).
- Start with a few sample assignments. These sample assignments from open honors classes available at TCF.org provide examples of what individual honors assignments might look like:
 - + Harvest Collegiate Algebra open honors assignment from teacher John McCrann
 - + Harvest Collegiate monthly book club assignments for ninth and tenth grade students in honors math
 - + Selected assignments and resources compiled by the College and Career Academy Support Network at UC Berkeley

Diversifying Enrollment in AP or IB Classes

Another approach to ensuring that desegregated high schools are integrated at the classroom level is to focus on diversifying enrollment in high-level courses, with the goal of having all student subgroups enrolling in these classes at the same rate. Over 90 percent of all U.S. high schools offer at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course, but within these schools, access to AP differs dramatically based on race and class. Middle- and high-income students are almost three times as likely as their low-income peers to enroll in at least one AP course; and while 25 percent of Asian students and 12 percent of white students take AP courses, just 9 percent of Latinx students, 6 percent of Native American students, and 6 percent of black students do. ²²

Participation rates in the International Baccalaureate (IB) programs show similar gaps. These gaps are partly explained by having different AP or IB offerings at schools serving more low-income students and students of color, but most of the difference in AP and IB participation occurs within schools.²³ A 2013 report from the Education Trust found that less than 5 percent of all high schools with racially and economically diverse enrollment and at least twenty students in AP classes enrolled a proportional share of low-income students and students of color in AP.²⁴

Boston Collegiate Charter School, which serves middle and high school students in Boston, Massachusetts, and Equal Opportunity Schools, a nonprofit that works with schools and districts across the country, offer two examples of how to address the challenges of closing AP and IB participation gaps and ensuring integrated classrooms.

Boston Collegiate

Boston Collegiate Charter School has taken clear steps over the past few years to narrow gaps in its AP enrollment based on race, class, and disability.²⁵ The school, located in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood, serves students in fifth through twelfth grades. About five years ago, school leaders began to notice two trends: white students were overrepresented in both AP and honors courses; and there was no clear pattern showing that students who had taken honors classes in previous years did better in AP classes than students who

took the AP class without previously taking an honors class in that subject. Faced with this data, school leaders set out to create more equitable opportunities and more integrated classrooms.²⁶

To address these issues, leaders de-tracked math and English courses. Student data had shown that honors courses were unnecessary for students to succeed in AP coursework. Honors enrollment already was not a requirement for AP enrollment, but having a separate honors track seemed to perpetuate the racial gaps in identification for honors courses into AP enrollment. This process took several years and required tackling a few grades at a time.

At the same time, administrators worked with teachers and the college counseling team to build excitement about AP courses as college-level work, and to encourage students of all backgrounds—particularly those subgroups of students that were currently underrepresented in AP coursework—to consider enrolling in at least one AP course.

These initiatives saw considerable success. From 2015 to 2018, Boston Collegiate increased overall participation of juniors and seniors in AP courses from 55 percent to 72 percent. The school cut the participation gap between white students and students of color almost in half— from 19 percent to 10 percent—and narrowed the gap between low-income and other students to one percentage point. They also more than doubled the percentage of students with IEPs participating in AP courses, from 16 percent to 35 percent.²⁷

Administrators and teachers at the school continue to look at AP enrollment data, grades, and behavioral data for every subgroup at least once every quarter. Grade level teams are trained to ask themselves questions like, What are our students experiencing in our grade? Where, if anywhere, is implicit bias playing out? Where do we feel that we need to focus our efforts?

Equal Opportunity Schools

Equal Opportunity Schools is a Seattle-based nonprofit that partners with schools and districts across the country to address gaps in AP and IB participation by race and class. EOS sets a goal of closing these participation gaps while maintaining (or increasing) the achievement of students in the programs.

Schools apply to work with EOS through a competitive application process that includes data on current AP or IB enrollment and evidence that district and school leadership want to address their socioeconomic and racial achievement disparities. EOS selects districts that show promise in making serious strides towards closing gaps and typically partners with those districts for at least three years. Schools pay for a portion of the cost of EOS's assistance, which is also underwritten by grants.

EOS staff work with school leaders to examine their staffing, course offerings, and student data; develop strategies for increasing the number of low-income students and students of color in high-level courses; conduct staff coaching to address gaps in AP/IB access; decide on actions to enroll more students in AP/IB classes; and build supports to help students thrive in those classes. San Jose Unified School District, for example, more than doubled the number of low-income and minority students participating in AP or IB classes while maintaining their exam pass rate.²⁸

Strategies for Getting Started Diversifying AP/IB

- Take a deep dive into the data. Identify gaps in AP and IB participation across race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English language learner status, and disability. Where are the largest gaps? How do these gaps relate to other gaps in students' academic trajectories and performance data for students? EOS recommends using the gaps in AP or IB enrollment to calculate how many students are "missing" from AP and IB because their subgroups are underrepresented. How many more students would have the chance to take AP and IB if all subgroups participated at equally high rates? These "missing" students should be the focus of any efforts to expand and improve AP or IB.
- Consider pledging to close the gap in a year. EOS
 CEO and founder Reid Saaris recommends that
 schools commit to making enrollment changes
 quickly and then focusing on supporting the
 students who are new to AP or IB in the years that
 follow. According to Saaris,

We've seen the greatest success come when leaders decide to close this gap in a year—not work around the margins of it. Incremental change can leave students feeling isolated, experiencing stereotype threat, and underperforming as compared to their potential. Start talking with kids—a school-wide survey is very useful—and making connections. Who wants more challenge? Who wants to go to college? Who has never heard about advanced courses or didn't know they could sign up? Who feels that "students like me" don't belong in AP? Which adults want to work to change this and would participate in an equity committee to close the gap and find all the missing students? What supports do teachers want to feel successful in newly equitable advanced classes? 29

Schools that are interested in partnering with EOS can look through their online resources and fill out an inquiry form.

• Consider de-tracking other classes. Working to diversify AP/IB can also be an impetus to launch broader conversations about the academic gateways and roadblocks that students face earlier in their educations. At Boston Collegiate, for example, leaders worked to diversify AP classes and de-track math and English classes concurrently. Implementing embedded/open honors may also support expanded and diversified AP/IB enrollment. However, Saaris cautions against using the existence of tracking in earlier grades as an excuse for not addressing AP/IB gaps head-on. EOS has seen schools successfully close AP/IB gaps in a year—even when tracking in earlier grades is in place—and then go on to use that success as a motivation to dismantle other forms of tracking.³⁰

Additional Resources

- Contact TCF researchers with questions by emailing integratingclassrooms@tcf.org.
- Request to be connected with one of the schools featured in this toolkit to learn more about their approach to diverse enrollment by emailing integratingclassrooms@tcf.org.
- Read TCF's in-depth case studies at TCF.org of charter schools and school districts that have prioritized school integration:
 - Blackstone Valley Prep
 - Cambridge Public Schools (MA)
 - Champaign Schools (IL)
 - Chicago Public Schools
 - Citizens of the World Charter Schools
 - City Garden Montessori School
 - Dallas Independent School District
 - Denver School of Science and Technology
 - Eden Prairie Public Schools (MN)
 - Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom Public Charter School
 - Hartford Public Schools (CT)
 - Jefferson County Public Schools (KY)
 - Morris Jeff Community School
 - New York City Public Schools
 - Stamford Public Schools (CT)

Conclusion

The strategies and examples outlined in this toolkit are designed to help schools define a path toward improving classroom integration and differentiated instruction. A common theme in the tips for getting started with any of these models is that relatively simple technical fixes—like creating additional assignments for a more challenging syllabus or counseling more students of color to consider AP courses—must often be coupled with the more complex task of intensive staff engagement. The successful implementation of open honors, schoolwide enrichment, or efforts to diversify AP/IB programs relies on administrator and teacher buy-in—which requires building a shared

understanding of the institutional racism and classism, implicit bias, and social barriers that have contributed to a status quo of segregated classrooms. Lastly, in addition to sharing a common definition of the problem, school communities must also build a shared vision for what a more equitable environment—one with diverse classrooms that challenge and support all students—could look like.

The work of integrating classrooms lies at the center of the work of successful integrated schools. In order to get to the point of tackling this challenge, schools must create strategies to build diverse enrollment. As schools are working to integrate classrooms, they should also consider how they are fostering opportunities for students to make meaningful connections with peers across lines of difference—two challenges that are the topics of the other toolkits in this series.

Author

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Notes

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