Student Assignment and Enrollment Policies that Advance School Integration: A National Perspective to Support Planning in the District of Columbia

MARCH 6, 2023 —HALLEY POTTER

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Integrating schools is a key part of creating a well-rounded, high-quality education that prepares students to thrive in a diverse world. Unfortunately, today, that goal is out of reach for many students. Almost seventy years after *Brown v. Board*, American public schools are still highly segregated by race and socioeconomic status. Within large school districts, economic school segregation has increased by almost 50 percent since 1991.[1] And nationwide, two in five students attend schools with very little racial diversity, where over 75 percent of students come from a single racial or ethnic group.[2] Out of more than 400 metro areas nationwide, the Washington, D.C. metro area schools are the fifty-third most segregated in terms of students' economic status and twenty-third most segregated in terms of Black–White separation.[3] This segregation in the District of Columbia's schools undergirds systemic racism, creates social strife, and leaves children unprepared for an increasingly interconnected and multicultural world. As economist Heather McGhee explains, "segregation sends distorting messages not just to Black and brown but also to white children."[4]

School segregation is not natural or accidental. It is the result of years of school districting and housing policies that were designed to separate people and control access to opportunity. But the flip side of that reality is that segregation can also be undone through thoughtful policies and practices.

The process currently being undertaken by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education to analyze student assignment policies and create a facilities master plan for District of Columbia schools poses the opportunity to create new pathways for more students to learn in integrated classrooms alongside peers from different backgrounds. As background information to inform and inspire that planning, this report draws together examples from around the country that illustrate different strategies and considerations for creating student assignment and enrollment policies that promote integration.

What is School Integration, and Why is it Worth Pursuing?

Educators and advocates working to create diverse learning environments for students often point out the important difference between desegregation and integration. *Desegregation* is the process of dismantling the laws and practices that prevent people of different

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This report can be found online at: https://tcf.org/content/report/student-assignment-and-enrollment-policies-that-advance-school-integration-a-national-perspective-to-support-planning-in-the-district-of-columbia/

races, socioeconomic statuses, or other characteristics from attending school together. *Integration* means intentionally creating and maintaining schools with diverse student bodies, where students of all backgrounds are respected, affirmed, supported, and challenged, with cultures that encourage students to learn from each other across lines of difference. Integration begins with desegregation, but requires much more.[5]

The "Five Rs of Real Integration," a framework developed by high school student leaders in the youth advocacy group IntegrateNYC, is a useful tool for conceptualizing the different dimensions of this goal. In this framework, the "Five Rs" that schools should pursue are:

1. **Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Enrollment:** Schools should enroll racially and socioeconomically diverse student populations that reflect the diversity of their communities.
2. **Resources:** Resources should be equitably distributed across schools. Students should have access to the same academic and extracurricular opportunities.
3. **Relationships:** Schools should encourage building relationships across group identities. They employ a culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum and pedagogy.
4. **Restorative Justice:** Schools should use an approach to discipline that does not result in disproportionate punishment for marginalized students, and that disrupts the school-to-prison pipeline.
5. **Representation:** The school faculty should reflect the diversity of the student body and include representation of communities of color, immigrant communities, and the neurodiverse community.[6]

Benefits of Integration

School integration, when done well, leads to direct benefits for students.[7] Research shows that when students go to a school with people from all kinds of different backgrounds, they get a better, more well-rounded education. Not only do they learn understanding and empathy for people from all walks of life, but they also are all much better prepared to live and work in our increasingly diverse society. Students in socioeconomically and racially diverse schools have higher average test scores and graduation rates than peers of similar backgrounds attending schools with concentrated poverty.[8] The experience of learning in integrated classrooms alongside peers with different experiences, perspectives, and abilities helps to reduce racial bias and increase creativity, motivation, deeper learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.[9] When schools are well integrated socioeconomically, with strong school cultures that foster meaningful interactions across groups, they can also help to develop cross-class friendships, which significantly increase low-income students' chances of economic success later in life.[10] Furthermore, as Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall famously wrote, "Unless our children begin to learn together, there is little hope that our people will ever begin to live together."[11] Research backs this idea. According to one study, students who attend racially diverse high schools are more likely to live in diverse neighborhoods five years after graduation.[12] School integration is an essential strategy for ensuring that all children have access to high-quality school options.

National Trends

Unfortunately, despite the clear benefits of integration, many students across the country attend segregated schools. As of 2020–21, 38 percent of students nationwide attend schools where more than three-quarters of students are from a single racial or ethnic group,[13] and the average low-income student attended a school where the poverty rate was 30 percentage points higher than at the average non-low-income student's school.[14]

Nationwide, the biggest factor contributing to racial school segregation is segregation between public school districts.[15] This is also true in the D.C. metro area, which includes District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and twenty-one of the surrounding school districts in Virginia, Maryland, and West Virginia. Roughly half (55 percent) of the school segregation between White students and non-White students in the D.C. metro area is caused by segregation between districts. Inter-district segregation is also the

largest driver of economic segregation in the D.C. metro area, accounting for 45 percent of the school segregation between low-income and non-low-income students.[16]

Leadership to address inter-district segregation typically must come from the state or federal level, or through collaborative voluntary efforts of multiple districts. But intra-district segregation also exists, and so individual school districts, including DCPS, also have an important role to play in promoting integration among all the different schools—traditional public schools, magnet schools, and charter schools—within their boundaries.

The strongest, most effective way that school districts can promote integration is through their student assignment and enrollment policies. Roughly 200 school districts and charter schools or networks across the country have integration policies in place that consider socioeconomic status (SES) and/or race in their student assignment or enrollment policies to promote diverse enrollments at some or all schools.[17] The District of Columbia is represented in this group because an at-risk preference is currently in place for a limited number of DCPS schools and charter schools in the unified lottery system;[18] however, the majority of district and charter schools in the District of Columbia do not have any mechanisms for promoting integration.

Communities that decide to work to increase integration in schools are frequently motivated by the desire to close the opportunity gaps faced by students in segregated schools, to mitigate the challenges of overcrowding or under-enrollment associated with segregated and uneven student enrollment, and to create richer learning environments for students that match the diversity of their communities and future workplaces. Students, parents, educators, and community leaders can all be drivers of this change. For example, in New York City, students have been powerful advocates for integration, organizing with groups like IntegrateNYC and Teens Take Charge and sharing how school segregation has affected them directly.[19] In Eden Prairie, Minnesota, parent leaders from the local Somali immigrant community helped get more equitable school attendance zones approved.[20] And in Dallas, Texas, school district leaders tasked with innovation and helping attract new students to the district created a model of opening intentionally diverse schools.[21]

Setting Diversity Goals

School districts that pursue effective school integration policies typically define a diversity goal first, then put in place student assignment policies to reach that goal. The diversity goal may be based on creating school environments that are reflective of the diversity of the broader community, that are demographically similar to each other, or that reflect research on the benefits of different levels of school diversity. Here are examples of school districts pursuing integration and the diversity goals they set.

Community School District 15, Brooklyn, New York

New York City's Community School District 15 in Brooklyn created a diversity plan for all middle schools in the district.[22] Middle school student assignment in District 15 is based on choice. Before the district created the diversity plan, 52 percent of middle school students enrolled in the district were from low-income households, and the percentage of low-income students at individual middle schools in the district ranged from 20 percent to 97 percent. The diversity plan set a four-year goal for all schools to fall within 40–75 percent low-income enrollment.

In pursuit of an equitable path toward change, the district intentionally set as a goal a range where the upper limit is further from the district average (a school can have a percentage that is up to 23 percentage points above the district average of 52 percent low-income) than the lower limit is below the average (schools can only fall 12 percentage points below the district average of 52 percent low-income). The working group that developed the plan made this decision in order to ensure that middle schools located in a lower-income area would have more time to shift enrollment and would not have to undergo much more dramatic changes than other schools that started out closer to the district average.[23]

Stamford Public Schools, Connecticut

Stamford Public Schools in Connecticut set a goal for all schools in the district to fall within plus or minus 10 percentage points of the district average enrollment of disadvantaged students (defined as students receiving free and reduced-price lunch, English language learners, and students living in income-restricted housing).[24]

Dallas Independent School District, Texas

Dallas Independent School District (DISD) in Texas established socioeconomically diverse enrollment as a goal for most of its "Transformation Schools," which are newly created themed schools with no academic entry requirements. Nearly 90 percent of students enrolled in district schools are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, but the actual population within the district, as well as the greater Dallas metropolitan area, are both much more socioeconomically diverse.

DISD was inspired by research on the benefits of school integration to create new, socioeconomically diverse schools by trying to attract more middle-class families who were choosing private schools or moving out of the district to enroll in DISD instead. In order to help set diversity goals for its transformation schools, DISD sorted all census blocks in the city into four quartiles of socioeconomic advantage, based on median household income, percentage of single-parent families, home ownership rate, and adult educational attainment. DISD set a two-part diversity goal for its transformation schools: to enroll 50 percent economically disadvantaged and 50 percent non-economically disadvantaged students (based on eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch), and ensure that, based on their neighborhood analysis, at least 12.5 percent of students come from the bottom socioeconomic quartile and at least 12.5 percent of students come from the lower-middle socioeconomic quartile.[25]

Designing Student Assignment and Enrollment Policies to Reach Diversity Goals

School districts can leverage a variety of different enrollment systems and policies to promote integration and reach their diversity goals.

Redrawing School Boundaries

School districts can factor socioeconomic and/or racial diversity into decisions about redrawing school attendance zone boundaries in order to promote integration. Districts sometimes redraw boundaries to increase integration and address other enrollment considerations, such as addressing overcrowding or determining siting of new schools, at the same time. For example:

- Eden Prairie Public School District in Minnesota redrew attendance boundaries for its elementary schools to balance concentrations of poverty.[26]
- Roaring Fork School District in Colorado redrew the boundaries for the district's elementary schools to balance the student populations. Administrators also opted to build a new school in a location where it could more easily draw a mix of students from different backgrounds.[27]
- Iowa City Community School District in Iowa approved a redistricting process designed to reduce concentrations of poverty at the highest-poverty schools in the district.[28]
- Howard County Public School System in Maryland redrew boundaries to better integrate their schools socioeconomically and to relieve overcrowding.[29]
- Minneapolis Public Schools in Minnesota redrew attendance zone boundaries in order to reduce the number of racially isolated schools.[30]

Combining Zones and Redistributing Grade Levels

Districts can also promote integration by combining multiple attendance zones to create a more diverse catchment area and then reconfiguring grade levels across multiple school buildings. For example:

- Morris School District in New Jersey moved away from a model of having K–5 elementary schools in each neighborhood and instead consolidated attendance zones to create three schools serving grades K–12 and three serving third through fifth grades, which resulted in more even demographics across schools.[31]
- Chicago Public Schools in Illinois merged two elementary schools, one with a more affluent student body and one that was predominantly low-income, to create a united school across two campuses, one serving grades K–4 and the other fifth through eighth grades.[32]

Diversity-Conscious School Choice Policies

Research shows that free-market school choice plans, without diversity as a built-in consideration, tend to exacerbate segregation because families with the most resources and social capital are more likely to use the systems to access high-performing schools.[33] However, diversity-conscious school choice policies can be effective tools to integrate schools.

"Equitable Choice" or "Controlled Choice" across a District. "Equitable choice" or "controlled choice" allows families to rank their school preferences from among all schools in the district or a subset of schools and then assigns students to schools based on those preferences, using an algorithm that ensures a relatively even distribution of students by socioeconomic status and/or race across all schools. Cambridge Public Schools in Massachusetts and Campaign Schools in Illinois are examples of districts that use district-wide equitable choice plans.[34]

Lottery Preferences for Magnet, Charter, or Other Choice Schools. Districts may implement lottery preferences based on socioeconomic status or other diversity factors in order to promote integration in choice-based schools. The District of Columbia's at-risk priority, which gives a preference in the unified lottery for students identified as at-risk of academic failure who apply to certain charter and district schools, is an example of this type of policy.[35] Another example comes from Charlotte–Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina,

which uses an admissions lottery for its magnet schools that divides seats evenly between applicants in low, medium, and high SES categories, which are determined by combining family-reported data on household income, family size, and parental educational attainment with census data on socioeconomic status of the neighborhood matched with students' home addresses.[36]

Transfer Policies. Districts may implement transfer policies that consider diversity, generally by giving preference to school transfer requests that would increase the socioeconomic or racial diversity of affected schools, or by giving a priority to low-income students or other educationally disadvantaged students when reviewing transfer requests. San Jose Unified School District provides a preference in elementary school transfers and the secondary school choice system for applicants requesting a "voluntary integrative transfer"—moving from a low-SES attendance boundary to a high-SES school or vice versa.[37]

Combining Boundary-based and Choice-based Strategies

Some school districts find it helpful to combine redrawing or combining school boundaries with choice-based integration strategies.

For example, *Stamford Public Schools* works toward its goal of having all schools in the Stamford Public School system will fall within plus or minus 10 percentage points of the district average enrollment of disadvantaged students (students receiving free and reduced-price lunch, English Language Learners, and students living in income-restricted housing) by frequently reexamining attendance boundaries for neighborhood schools as well as weighting magnet school lotteries by both educational disadvantage (balancing the percentage of disadvantaged students at each school) and geographic zone (allowing preference for students from certain zones where neighborhood schools are overenrolled or imbalanced).[38]

In another example, *Denver Public Schools* uses an enrollment priority for low-income students at some of its lower-poverty

schools. It reserves an additional 2,500 seats across all schools for late-arriving students, who disproportionately come from low-income families. The district has also strategically created several open-access zones in areas that include both high- and low-income neighborhoods, replacing attendance boundaries with a choice-based enrollment in these areas to encourage integration. It also considers the potential for socioeconomic integration as one of the factors when evaluating school requests for district facilities.[39]

Additional Resources

Contact TCF researchers with questions by emailing diverseenrollment@tcf.org

Data on school segregation and integration trends nationwide:

- "K–12 Education: Student Population Has Significantly Diversified, But Many Schools Remain Divided along Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Lines," United States Government Accountability Office, June 2022
- "School Segregation in U.S. Metro Areas," The Century Foundation, May 2022
- "Here Is What School Integration in America Looks Like Today," The Century Foundation, December 2, 2020
- "Harming Our Common Future: America's Segregated Schools 65 Years after *Brown*," The Civil Rights Project and the Center for Education and Civil Rights, May 2019

Summaries of the research on school integration:

- "The Benefits of Socioeconomically and Racially Integrated Schools and Classrooms," The Century Foundation, April 2019
- "The Complementary Benefits of Racial and Socioeconomic Diversity in Schools," National Coalition on School Diversity, March 2017
- "Re-Weaving the Social Fabric through Integrated Schools: How Intergroup Contact Prepares Youth to Thrive in a Multiracial Society," National Coalition on School Diversity, May 2018

Case studies by The Century Foundation of school districts and charter schools that have worked to advance school integration:

- Eden Prairie Public Schools, MN (redrawing boundaries)
- Howard County Public School System, MD (redrawing boundaries)
- Stamford Public Schools, CT (redrawing boundaries and lottery preferences for magnet schools)
- Morris School District, NJ (combining zones and redistributing grades)
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, NC (combining zones and redistributing grades)
- Cambridge Public Schools, MA (district-wide equitable choice)
- Champaign Schools, IL (district-wide equitable choice)
- Jefferson County Public Schools, KY (district-wide equitable choice)
- Wake County Public Schools and Winston-Salem/ Forsyth County Schools, NC (lottery preferences for magnet schools)
- Chicago Public Schools, IL (lottery preferences for magnet schools)
- Blackstone Valley Prep, RI (lottery preferences for inter-district charter schools)
- Denver School of Science and Technology, CO (lottery preferences for charter schools)
- Dallas Independent School District, TX (lottery preferences for district choice schools)
- Hartford Public Schools, CT (lottery preferences for inter-district magnet schools and inter-district transfers)
- New York City Public Schools, NY (lottery preferences for district schools)

Authors

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