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Diversity Advantage

A Kentucky district tackles school segregation

THE SEMINAL COLEMAN REPORT of 1966 examined the differences between schools for black and white students across the country. Expecting to find vast differences in educational resources such as teachers or books, Johns Hopkins University sociologist James S. Coleman instead found that concentrations of disadvantaged students were the most important school-level factor that affected student achievement.

Fast forward almost 50 years, and schools are still highly segregated by race and socioeconomic status. While we have made improvements in the

even distribution of students across schools, many students have little exposure to students of different groups. According to national data interpreted by The Civil Rights Project at UCLA, about 15 percent of black and Latino students attend schools that are less than 1 percent white; 43 percent of Latinos and 38 percent of blacks attend schools that are less than 10 percent white.

White students are just as isolated, with a third of U.S. public schools having student bodies that are at least 90 percent white. Black and Latino students are far more likely than their

white peers to also attend a school with concentrated poverty, which exacerbates their disadvantage.

School diversity matters for student achievement and greater social cohesion. Black, Latino, and low-income students tend to have greater scholastic achievement in diverse schools, without causing any declines in scores for their more advantaged peers. All student groups show greater collaboration and problem-solving skills when in diverse settings, and are more likely to live and work in more integrated settings as adults.

The Government Accountability Office also reports that schools with concentrated populations of black and Latino as well as low-income students receive fewer resources; offer fewer math, science, and college prep courses; and have greater rates of expulsion, suspension, and ninth-grade retention.

School districts are limited in their options to create more diverse schools, due to housing patterns and legal limitations. A 1974 Supreme Court case, *Milliken v. Bradley*, stipulated that school districts could not be forced to integrate with neighboring districts for the purpose of achieving greater school diversity. School districts often have starkly contrasting demographics than their neighboring districts, which makes achieving diverse schools extremely difficult. In 2007, the Supreme Court also ruled that school assignments could not be made based on individual student race to achieve school diversity, unless all other school assignment methods had been tried.

STRIVING FOR DIVERSITY

Kentucky's Jefferson County Public Schools were forged as a merger

between the Louisville and Jefferson County school districts in response to a 1974 court order to desegregate. Louisville had limited ability to create diverse schools on its own due to a small population of white students relative to its black students.

Jefferson continues as a unitary school district, despite being released from its court order in 1978. Through multiple court cases to defend its ever-evolving integration plans, including a loss at the U.S. Supreme Court in 2007, the district strives to create schools that are socioeconomically and racially diverse.

Jefferson accomplishes this through controlled choice programs. Parents rank the schools they would like their child to attend, and the school factors in parental preference with target diversity ratings for each school. Students are given a numerical value based on the demographics of their census block, which involves parental education, family income, and proportion of residents that are white/non-white.

Parents of elementary school students may choose between neighborhood schools in their geographic cluster or magnet schools that serve the entire district. Middle and high school students are assigned to schools with boundaries designed to maximize diversity. Jefferson also tries to keep transportation times at a minimum for students.

The district benefits from parental support, which may be bolstered by the many parents who are products of the diverse system themselves. More than 90 percent of parents say that diverse schools are beneficial for their child's education according to a research study by social scientists Gary Orfield and Erica Frankenberg in 2011.

While some challenges persist, including long bus rides and school information distribution, administrators have strong support from the research community to help inform and improve their practices. In response to parental concerns about transportation time, for example, the district has worked to increase efficiency, lowering average student bus trip times.

School officials see desegregation as a vital aspect of school turnaround. The combination of school choice and focus on diversity means that poor-performing schools are easier to improve. Schools can be reformed to attract a wide variety of families, instead of trying also to address a student body with high concentrations of poverty and potential learning gaps.

Student outcomes have improved, though it is unclear if diverse schools are due the credit. More students from all demographic groups have been deemed "proficient" or "distinguished" on statewide assessments, and the number of students who are "college and career ready" has doubled since 2011.

Of equal importance, students also attribute important skills to their diverse school environments. High school juniors were asked in 2011, "How do you believe your school experiences will affect your ability to work with members of other races and ethnic groups?" The answer: 75 percent of black students and 77 percent of white students said they helped a lot or somewhat.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

While it is difficult to compare two cities, researcher Myron Orfield (brother of Gary), has done so with Louisville and Detroit. The two cities had similar

demographics in the 1960s, and both sought to integrate their schools through merging with surrounding suburban districts.

However, Detroit's plan was overriden by the Supreme Court in the 1974 *Milliken v. Bradley* case, while Louisville's was kept intact. The differences between these two cities 40 years later are stark. Detroit trails Louisville by significant margins in student achievement scores, job growth, population growth, and tax base. Orfield attributes this to the white flight that occurred in Detroit, as residents fled to the suburbs to avoid school integration and busing plans.

In contrast, Jefferson residents would have had to move so far away from the city that most residents found that staying in the city was a better option, though some residents did, and still do, choose to live in neighboring counties due to the school district. As a result of district policies on school diversity, housing is also more integrated than in Detroit, as a family's address is no longer tied to their school assignment.

Choices may have been difficult politically, but have brought about positive gains for the long-term sustainability and well-being of its citizens.



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