

The children of children who went to desegregated schools reap benefits, too, study finds

Two generations show better outcomes from integrated schools



Education by the Numbers

Column by **JILL BARSHAY**

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It was 62 years ago this month that the United States Supreme Court issued its landmark decision that separate schools for whites and blacks were “inherently unequal,” thus setting in motion more than 800 school desegregation court orders around the country. A Berkeley economist, Rucker C. Johnson, has been tracking thousands of the children of that era into adulthood, as they had children of their own. And he’s concluded that integration has been a powerfully effective tool for raising the educational levels and living standards for at least two generations of black families.

“Equal opportunity education policies generally are motivated to try to break the cycle of poverty, to break the vicious cycle of disadvantage from one generation to the next, and create a virtuous cycle where being born poor isn’t a life sentence,” said Johnson, an associate professor at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley.

“We have a very rare opportunity where a major intervention [desegregation] has been shown to be very effective on one generation’s lifetime outcomes, and then to be able to show that those beneficial effects extend into the next generation — particularly the black children whose parents went to desegregated schools.”

Johnson doesn’t think desegregation worked simply because black and white kids sat in the same classrooms. Instead he argues that desegregation was accompanied by more educational spending, and that

helped these children learn more and eventually become better educated parents, who would raise their own children to work hard at school.

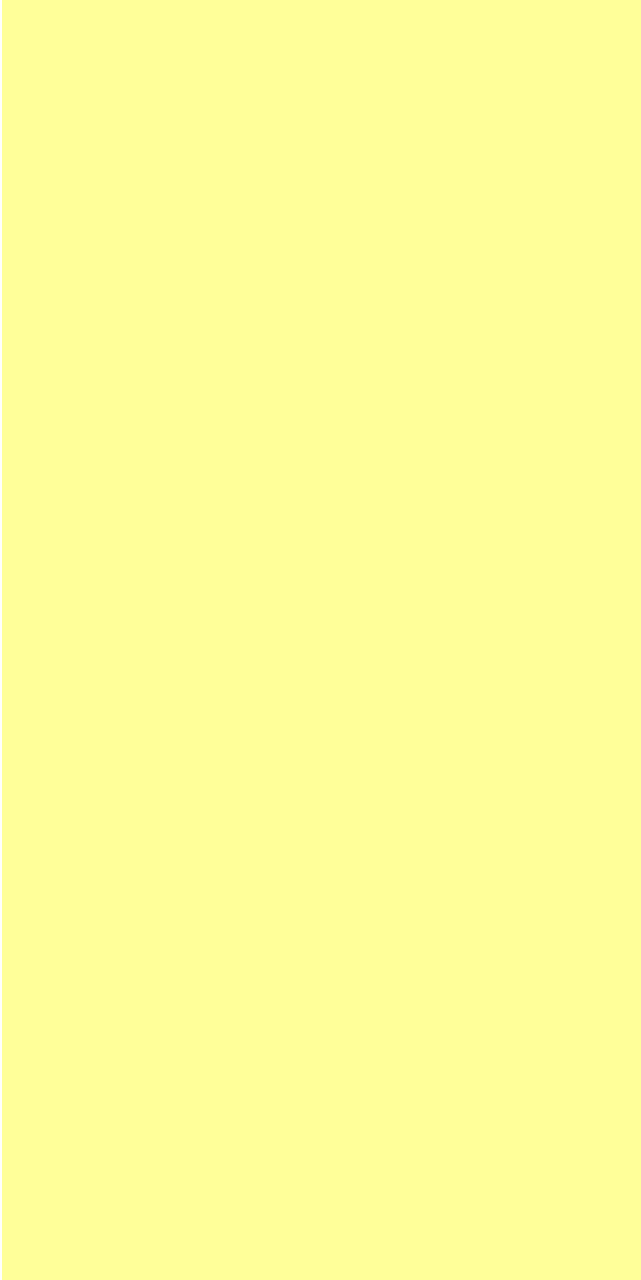
Desegregation court orders hit in different years in different cities, and Johnson was able to compare how younger siblings, who had attended more years in integrated schools, fared differently from older siblings who had experienced more years of segregated schools. He found that the black siblings who were exposed to more years of desegregation tended to do better. They graduated from high school and college in higher numbers, earned higher incomes, went into more prestigious occupations, enjoyed better health and were less likely to go to jail. The study of siblings is important because it compares kids with the same parenting, family income and home neighborhoods. Presumably they had similar upbringings, which gives more weight to the conclusion that a desegregated education made a difference.

Meanwhile, desegregation had no effect — positive or negative — on how white children fared, according to this study.



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Previous studies have also found large benefits to black students after desegregation. But Johnson also tracked the offspring of these desegregated students — the next generation, born after 1980. And Johnson found that the more years of desegregated schooling their parents had experienced, the better outcomes these kids had.

Specifically, these children had higher math and reading test scores, were less likely to repeat a grade, were more likely to graduate from high school, go to college and attend a higher quality college.

Johnson's analysis links desegregation records with demographic, income, health, incarceration and education data, and it's expected to be published in a forthcoming book under contract with the Russell Sage

Foundation. The first-generation study began as [a working paper of the National Bureau of Economic Research](#), most recently revised in August 2015 with data through 2013. A summary of the second-generation analysis, titled “The Grandchildren* of Brown: The Long Legacy of School Desegregation,” can be found [here](#). Johnson delivered a presentation on his research findings during the American Educational Research Association’s annual meeting in Washington in April 2016.

In the first-generation study, among the students who themselves attended desegregated schools, Johnson believes that money drove the superior outcomes for students. He points out that the desegregated schools had smaller class sizes and higher spending per student.

In the subsequent offspring study, many of these next-generation kids didn’t attend the same court-ordered desegregated schools of their parents. Some attended more segregated schools. Other families moved to wealthier neighborhoods with better schools. Despite those differences, the children of “desegregated” parents tended to be doing quite well, he found. For each additional year of desegregated schooling that the parent had had, Johnson found that the child was 2 percentage points more likely to graduate from high school, for example.

Johnson argues that parenting is the driver. “We know that parental education attainment has a huge influence, and these kids have parents with higher educational outcomes,” Johnson said.

Despite this promising research, there doesn’t seem to be much hope for school integration. Nearly 500 of the desegregation orders Johnson studied have since expired. And today blacks and whites often live in different towns, instead of on different sides of the same town, making it almost impossible for school officials to foster integration. But if Johnson is correct that resources are what made the difference, then perhaps we should all worry less about desegregation and more about getting adequate resources to all schools, in all neighborhoods.

**Johnson uses “grandchildren” in the title because he counts three*

generations, starting with the parents who fought for civil rights in the 1950s. He considers their kids, born between 1950 and 1975, and the first to attend integrated schools, to be the “second” generation, and their offspring, born after 1980, to be the “third” generation.