

The Washington Post

Study of Montgomery County schools shows benefits of economic integration

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Washington Post Staff Writers
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Low-income students in Montgomery County performed better when they attended affluent elementary schools instead of ones with higher concentrations of poverty, according to a new study that suggests economic integration is a powerful but neglected school-reform tool.

The debate over reforming public education has focused mostly on improving individual schools through better teaching and expanded accountability efforts. But the study, to be released Friday, addresses the potential impact of policies that mix income levels across several schools or an entire district. And it suggests that such policies could be more effective than directing extra resources at higher-poverty schools.

The idea is easier to apply in areas with substantial middle-class populations and more difficult in communities, such as the District, with large concentrations of poverty. Yet it lends fresh support to an idea as old as the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954: Segregated schools - in this case, separated by economics, not law - are rarely as good as diverse ones at educating low-income students.

"Today, 95 percent of education reform is

about trying to make high-poverty schools work," said Richard Kahlenberg, senior fellow at the Century Foundation, a progressive think tank based in New York that published the report. "This research suggests there is a much more effective way to help close the achievement gap. And that is to give low-income students a chance to attend middle-class schools."

The study tracked the performance of 858 elementary students in public housing scattered across Montgomery from 2001 to 2007. About half the students ended up in schools where less than 20 percent of students qualified for subsidized meals. Most others went to schools where up to 60 percent of the students were poor and where the county had poured in extra money.

After seven years, the children in the lower-poverty schools performed 8 percentage

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points higher on standardized math tests than their peers attending the higher-poverty schools - even though the county had targeted them with extra resources. Students in these schools scored modestly higher on reading tests, but those results were not statistically significant.

"The conventional wisdom - and I don't want to knock the foundation of it - is that we really need to infuse the poorest schools with lots of resources," said Stefanie DeLuca, associate professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University, who has studied the issue and read an advance copy of the report. "This study turns that wisdom on its head to some extent. It says, actually, it's who you are going to school with."

Independent researchers call the report a step forward in studying the benefits of economic integration, which has been difficult to measure because it is hard to find large numbers of poor kids in wealthy areas. But Montgomery provided an ideal laboratory because of a long-standing policy of requiring developers to set aside housing for low-income families, who win spots through a lottery.

That randomness strengthens the study, researchers say. It mitigates a problem that hampered previous studies in which parents actively chose to place their children in better schools, making it difficult to separate the effect of the schools from the effect of having motivated parents.

Researchers see the results as especially significant because Montgomery, one of the nation's best and largest public school districts with 144,000 students, has been uncommonly aggressive in seeking to improve the performance of students in schools with higher poverty.

It has divided the county into a high-performing, more-affluent green zone and a high-needs red zone, where schools receive about \$2,000 more in per-pupil funding. And yet, the low-income students in the study performed better in the green-zone schools.

Montgomery School Superintendent Jerry D. Weast said that the report's findings were no surprise but that his policies are designed to counteract the ill effects of housing patterns that concentrate poverty in certain areas.

"We chose to do the art of the possible," Weast said. "Housing policy is a far stretch for a school superintendent."

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Education researcher Heather Schwartz wrote the study while working toward a PhD in education at Columbia University. She now works for the Rand Corp., which had no role in the study.

Researchers say that poor schools often struggle because they tend to attract rotating staffs of less-experienced teachers and administrators, among other problems. Schools with lower levels of poverty have a range of benefits that include more stable staffs, fewer discipline problems and more support from volunteers. Parents who have one job instead of three also have an easier time being involved. And expectations are usually higher.

"This is not about 'poor kids can't learn,' " DeLuca said. "It's about the fact that we've had a legacy in this country of segregated neighborhoods and socioeconomic isolation from opportunities and the mainstream of life."

The U.S. Education Department's \$4 billion "Race to the Top" program encourages states to adopt policies that increase the role of student performance in teacher evaluations, expand charter school offerings, make it easier to fire bad teachers and adopt national standards for reading and math.

But questions about integrating school systems have not been front-and-center since the 1970s, and scars from school busing battles have made policymakers leery of

raising such issues again. Most districts nationwide now assign students to schools based only on where they live. Parents with the means to live close to top-performing schools often have resisted efforts that would send their children to schools with larger numbers of students from low-income families.

"There is still this kind of fear, a fear that is not easily overcome when you have a government that is highly parochial," said David Rusk, the former mayor of Albuquerque who has written extensively on the subject. "Public officials in the United States with rare exceptions do not want to deal with the underlying economic and racial segregation of our neighborhoods."

A growing number of school districts - at least 60 so far - has in recent years been experimenting with strategies that promote economic diversity. These include magnet schools, student assignment policies that

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take into account economic status and agreements that give poor kids a chance to attend schools in wealthier suburbs.

"This study confirms what we've long believed," Education Department spokeswoman Sandra Abrevaya said via e-mail. She said that federal proposals to expand existing public school choice and magnet school programs were aimed at promoting racial and socioeconomic diversity.

The money spent on those programs, however, is relatively small, Kahlenberg said.

Dominique Johnson, 13, who attended an elementary school in the District before moving to a public housing apartment in Bethesda, said the difference was obvious.

"It was a bad, bad school," she said of her old school, shaking her head. "The principal, I don't think she did anything about all the fights. I had this one teacher who would curse at the kids."

At North Bethesda Middle School, she said, she found rules, focus and difficult classes with attentive teachers. Her grades dropped. But after a year or so, they improved.

"Now I understand the work," she said. "I've made friends. The principal is nice. It was harder at first, but at lunch I'd go to classes and the teachers helped me."

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