

Diversity Matters

Why We Should Create & Sustain Diversity in Schools

An ever-growing body of research demonstrates that racially and economically diverse schools have been strikingly successful on many important dimensions.

This CHHIRJ brief summarizes findings from the most rigorous contemporary research that we believe can best inform policies and programming related to racial and economic diversity in our public schools.

The Bottom Line

Evidence from a variety of fields strongly supports attaining and maintaining diversity, and avoiding racial and economic isolation in neighborhoods and schools.

The knowledge base on the benefits of racial and economic diversity and the harm of racial isolation has been growing steadily since 1990. This research emerges not merely from the traditional education literature, but increasingly from public health, neuroscience and economics.¹ In the last decade, research on these questions is more robust. As methods improved, researchers have become better able to disentangle the intertwined influences of school, home and neighborhood.² The research teaches us that racial and economic diversity, alone, certainly should not be expected to solve all educational challenges. At the same time, though, the research informs us that racial and economic diversity are far more beneficial conditions than racial and economic segregation, which are associated with poorer learning and life outcomes.

Math Achievement

The weight of social science evidence demonstrates that racially diverse schools are associated with achievement in math.

Students from all racial and economic backgrounds experience these benefits. In the largest study of its kind, Professor Douglas Harris used data from 22,000 schools to consider the effects of segregation on achievement test scores. After controlling for other factors, Harris found the Latino and African American gains in math were far greater in diverse schools than in segregated ones.³ A forthcoming study of longitudinal data over 30 years demonstrates a relationship between increasing segregation of black and Latino students and growth in math achievement gaps for these groups. Researchers suggest that the harms of segregation “outweigh” the overall “positive” changes in family background for such students.⁴

Reading Achievement

The weight of social science evidence demonstrates that racially diverse schools are associated with achievement in reading.

A recent study found that diverse high schools (25 to 54 percent students of color) have smaller racial gaps in reading than schools with either extremely high or extremely low portions of students of color.⁵ Another study showed that, independent of other factors, racial segregation of black students in Florida had a negative impact on reading test scores as early as the first grade.⁶

Beyond the Test Scores

Racially diverse learning environments are associated with critical thinking skills, intellectual engagement and a reduction in racial stereotyping.

Several reviews of the literature come to these conclusions. One seminal study concludes that students in diverse classrooms “showed the greatest engagement in active thinking processes, growth in intellectual engagement and motivation, and growth in intellectual and academic skills.”

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The Effects of Concentrated Poverty on Health

An ever-growing body of work from the public health field demonstrates further the immense challenges associated with schooling in high-poverty environments.

Even public health researchers are beginning to explicitly recommend that policies should attempt to reduce the share of children living and/or attending school in high-poverty, racially isolated areas. Certainly, some high-poverty schools are more successful than others. But the research in this field clearly shows that the overwhelming and worsening social problems and unequal structures of opportunity in many neighborhoods and schools are beyond the control of parents and teachers. This includes exposure to violence, unhealthy food options, stress, economic instability and other factors that make learning more difficult for children and that, in concentrated numbers, simply overwhelm their learning institutions.⁹

Removing Obstacles

Learning challenges related to stress, poverty, health problems and neighborhood violence are more effectively overcome in schools that are not sharply segregated by race and class.

Educators have long testified that schools with large shares of economically disadvantaged children become overwhelmed with challenges that interfere with education. In a longitudinal study of drop-out rates, one researcher concludes: “desegregated schools likely played a more effective role in counterbalancing student-level nonschool problems than did segregated ones.”¹⁰

Better Grades and Increased Success in College

Previous attendance at a segregated high school is associated with poorer college-level performance.

This is true even after accounting for a range of other plausible variables that could affect these outcomes. Researchers do not yet fully understand why larger racially segregated schools have the worst records in graduating and in preventing African American males from dropping out. Small, racially diverse schools have the best record in this area.¹¹ Economists consistently find that having more advantaged classmates and peers tends to benefit students of color. In well-controlled study, African American college students who had attended racially diverse schools fared better grade-wise in college than students who had attended racially segregated schools.¹² Research is less consistent on the question of the mechanisms through which these gains are achieved and whether or not other conditions in a school (i.e. poor teaching) might mitigate the positive effects.¹³

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge our reliance upon the work of Roslyn Mickelson, of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Professor Mickelson has been systematically gathering and synthesizing evidence on desegregation, diversity and segregation for several years. Beginning in February, 2010, CHHIRJ will release a series of new briefs that draw from new research on school diversity soon to be published in upcoming special volumes of the *Teachers College Record*. Roslyn Mickelson is the co-editor for the *Teachers College Record* series.

¹ See, e.g., Dolores Acevedo-Garcia & Theresa Osypuk, *Impacts of Housing and Neighborhoods on Health: Pathways, Racial/Ethnic Disparities and Policy Directions*, in SEGREGATION: THE RISING COSTS FOR AMERICA, 197 (James H. Carr & Nandinee Kutty eds., 2008); Kathleen C. Engel & Patricia A. McCoy, *From Credit Denial to Predatory Lending: The Challenge of Sustaining Minority Homeownership*, *id.* at 81; Margery Austin Turner, *Residential Segregation and Employment Inequality*, *id.* at 151. See also Naa Oyo Kwate, *Fried Chicken and Fresh Apples: Racial Segregation as a Fundamental Cause of Fast Food Density in Black Neighborhoods*, 14 HEALTH PLACE 32 (2008).

² As Roslyn Mickelson has noted, later studies were more likely to use longitudinal data, for example and more advanced statistical modeling that can separate the influences of home or neighborhood. See, e.g., Roslyn Mickelson, *Twenty-first Century Social Science on School Racial Diversity and Educational Outcomes*, 69 OHIO ST. L.J. 1173 (2008).

³ DOUGLAS HARRIS, CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS, LOST LEARNING, FORGOTTEN PROMISES: A NATIONAL ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL RACIAL SEGREGATION, STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT, AND “CONTROLLED CHOICE” PLANS, 14 (2006).

⁴ Mark Berends & Roberto Penaloza, *Increasing Racial Isolation and Test Score Gaps in Mathematics: A 30-Year Perspective*, 112 TCHRS. C. REC. ____ (forthcoming 2010).

⁵ Shelly Brown-Jeffy, *The Racial Gap in High School Reading Achievement: Why School Racial Composition Still Matters*, 13 RACE, GENDER, & CLASS, 268, 290 (2006).

⁶ Kathryn Borman et al., *Accountability in a Post-Desegregation Era: The Continuing Significance of Racial Segregation in Florida's Schools*, 41 AM. EDUC. RES. ASS'N, 605 (2004).

⁷ Most comprehensive is Mickelson, *supra* note 2. See also NAT. ACAD. OF EDUC., RACE-CONSCIOUS POLICIES FOR ASSIGNING STUDENTS TO SCHOOLS: SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH AND THE SUPREME COURT CASES (2007); Douglas Harris, *Educational Outcomes of Disadvantaged Students*, in HANDBOOK OF RES. IN EDUC. FIN. & POL'Y 551 (Helen Ladd & Ed Fiske eds., 2008).

⁸ Brief for 553 Social Scientists as Amici Curiae Supporting Respondents, Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, 551 U.S. 701 (2007) (No. 05-908) and Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education (No. 05-915) (citing Patricia Gurin, *Expert Report of Patricia Gurin*, submitted in Gratz, et al. v. Bollinger, et al., No. 97-75231 (E.D. Mich. 1999) and Grutter, et al. v. Bollinger, et al., no. 97-75928 (E.D. Mich. 1999)).

⁹ See *supra* note 1. See also SUSAN EATON & CANDICE PLAYER, CHARLES HAMILTON HOUSTON INST. FOR RACE & JUST., *Things I Have Seen and Heard: How Educators, Youth Workers and Elected Leaders Can Help Reduce the Damage of Childhood Exposure to Violence in Communities* (2009), available at <http://www.charleshamiltonhouston.org/Publications.aspx>.

¹⁰ Argun Saatcioglu, *Disentangling School and Student-Level Effects of Desegregation and Resegregation on the Dropout Problem in Urban High Schools: Evidence from the Cleveland Municipal School District, 1977-1998*, 112 TCHRS. C. REC. ____ (forthcoming 2010).

¹¹ Christopher B. Swanson, THE URB. INST., *Who Graduates? Who Doesn't? A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001*, (2004); Robert Balfanz & Thomas West, CTR. FOR SOC. ORG. OF SCHOOLS, *Racial Isolation and High School Promoting Power* (2006).

¹² Douglas Massey, Camille Charles & Gnesha Dinwiddie, *The Continuing Consequences of Segregation: Family Stress and College Academic Achievement*, 86 SOC. SCI. Q. 509 (2007).

¹³ Douglas N. Harris, *How Do School Peers Influence Student Educational Outcomes?*, 112 TCHRS. C. REC. ____ (forthcoming 2010).