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Research Brief

Can Socioeconomic Diversity Plans Produce Racial Diversity in K-12 Schools?

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SUMMARY

A survey of existing research indicates that both policy design and local context matter when it comes to whether or not socioeconomic status (SES) diversity plans will produce racial diversity—and that considering SES and neighborhood racial factors together may be the best way forward.

As remedial desegregation orders around the country end, analyses show that racial and economic segregation is rising.¹ In many instances, schools with high concentrations of black and Latino students also serve high concentrations of low-income students.² The Court's 2007 jurisprudence in *Parents Involved*, which invalidated a popular type of race-conscious school integration policy, left some districts focused on socioeconomic status (SES) integration policy as a less legally risky alternative to racial integration policy.³ Indeed, a number of prominent districts have replaced their

racial integration policies with SES integration in the last two decades.⁴ Yet even if, as advocates have suggested, SES diversity plans are less legally risky for districts than racial diversity plans,⁵ they may not be less politically contentious—or as effective in producing racial integration.⁶

Given what we know about the distinct benefits of racial diversity in schools (see NCS D Research Brief #5), alongside the growing interest in and evidence for promoting SES diversity (see NCS D Research Brief #10), we need to understand

- 1 Reardon, S. F., Grewal, E. T., Kalogrides, D., & Greenberg, E. (2012). Brown fades: The end of court-ordered school desegregation and the resegregation of American public schools. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 31(4), 876-904.; Government Accountability Office. (2016). Better Use of Information Could Help Agencies Identify Disparities and Address Racial Discrimination. Washington, DC: Author; Orfield, G., Ee, J., Frankenberg, E., & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2016). *Brown at 62: School Segregation by Race, Poverty and State*. Los Angeles, CA: Civil Rights Project/ Proyecto Derechos Civiles; Owens, A., Reardon, S.F., & Jencks, C. (online, 2016). Income Segregation Between Schools and School Districts. *American Educational Research Journal* DOI: 10.3102/0002831216652722.
- 2 Orfield, G., & Frankenberg, E. (2014). *Brown at 60: Great progress, a long retreat and an uncertain future*. Los Angeles: Civil Rights Project/ Proyecto Derechos Civiles.
- 3 But see *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin et al.*, 579 U. S. ____ (2016); Frankenberg, E., & Garces, L.M. (2016, July 20). *Fisher v. University of Texas and Lessons for K-12 Districts*. *Education Week*, 36. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/07/07/ifisher-v-iuniversity-of-texasi-and-lessons.html>
- 4 Potter, H., Quick, K., & Davies, E. (2016). *A New Wave of School Integration: Districts and Charters Pursuing Socioeconomic Diversity*. New York: The Century Foundation.
- 5 Kahlenberg, R. (2000). *All Together Now: Creating Middle Class Schools Through Public School Choice*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- 6 McDermott, K., Frankenberg, E., & Diem, S. (2015). The "post-racial" politics of race: Student assignment policy in three urban school districts. *Educational Policy* 29(3): 504-544; Eaton, S., (2012). Not your father's suburb: Race and rectitude in a changing Minnesota community. Available at <http://www.onenationindivisible.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/ONIRptNotYourFathersSuburbFIN.pdf>.; Reardon, S. F., Yun, J. T., & Kurlaender, M. (2006). Implications of income-based school assignment policies for racial school segregation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 28(1), 49-75.

whether SES diversity plans can also produce racial diversity, which types of SES plans have the best chance of achieving racial integration, and how SES and neighborhood racial demographics can be effectively combined. Integration plans that incorporate SES can take several different forms, including:

- 1 plans that use socioeconomic factors to achieve socioeconomic integration only,
- 2 race conscious plans that use socioeconomic factors only to achieve racial (and socioeconomic) integration,
- 3 race conscious plans that use racial factors (neighborhood or school makeup, etc.) and socioeconomic factors to achieve racial (and socio-economic) integration, and
- 4 other race conscious plans (e.g., in the higher education context, the Texas 10% plan).

The K-12 evidence on whether or not SES diversity plans effectively produce racial diversity is still emerging, largely because policy shifts toward SES-based diversity plans are recent and limited in scope, making it difficult to definitively understand whether these plans can produce racial diversity across multiple contexts. With affirmative action bans in several key states, though, we also have at our disposal evidence on the relationship between SES-focused diversity efforts and racial diversity in higher education. In order to consider the strongest evidence possible, we briefly review those studies here as well. Our survey of existing research indicates that both policy design and local context matter when it comes to whether or not socioeconomic diversity plans will produce racial

diversity—and that considering SES and neighborhood racial factors together may be the best way forward.⁷

Do policies using SES also produce racial diversity?

In K-12 education, SES-based assignment plans generally consider a student's or a neighborhood's SES when drawing attendance boundaries, authorizing school transfers or admission to schools of choice like magnets, and/or attempting to balance the SES makeup of schools across a district.⁸ These strategies run the gamut from weak to moderate to strong in terms of how effectively they produced SES and racial integration. Whether or not they do so depends at least in part on how extreme residential segregation by race is, how many students and schools they reach, how often they are employed, and how they define SES.⁹ The latter is almost always based on eligibility for free and reduced priced lunch (FRL), a common but, as we discuss in more detail below, problematic measure of student poverty.¹⁰

More recently, a growing number of districts are considering alternative measures of SES that take place-based considerations, like neighborhood income or residence in an urban district, into account. Other examples include whether a student attended Head Start, whether families receive income-based governmental assistance, and parental educational attainment. Still other measures are academic achievement, ELL status, and special education students—typically in combination with other racial and/or socioeconomic characteristics. Since these measures of

7 See Jennifer Ayscue, Erica Frankenberg, & Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, "The Complementary Benefits of Racial and Socioeconomic Diversity in Schools" (NCSD Research Brief #10, March 2017), available at www.school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo10.pdf.

8 Reardon, S.F., & Rhodes, L. (2011). "The Effects of Socioeconomic School Integration Plans on Racial School Desegregation." In Erica Frankenberg and Elizabeth DeBray (Eds.), *Integrating Schools in a Changing Society: New Policies and Legal Options for a Multiracial Generation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.; Potter et al., *A New Wave of School Integration*.

9 Reardon and Rhodes, "The Effects of Socioeconomic School Integration Plans."

10 Harwell, M.R., & LeBeau, B. (2010). Student eligibility for a free lunch as an SES measure in educational research. *Educational Researcher*, 39, 120-131.

SES are newer in terms of implementation, we do not yet understand the contexts in which they produce more or less racial or SES integration.

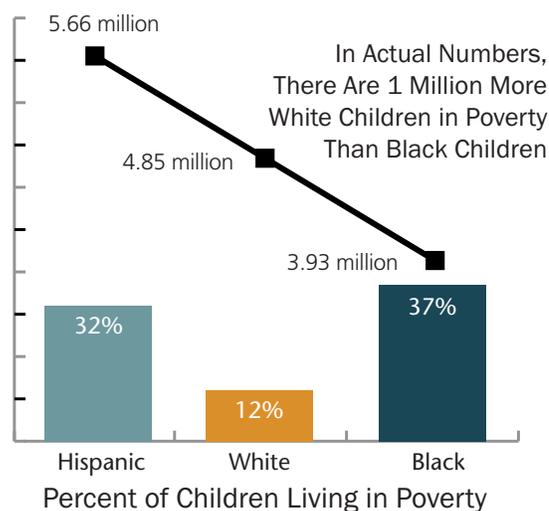
In one of the few systematic studies of SES-based student assignment, Stanford researchers, led by Sean Reardon, identified 40 districts using or planning to use SES plans and examined the relationship between plan characteristics and racial and economic desegregation trends. They found that most SES plans were based on weak strategies like voluntary transfer priorities (roughly two-thirds) and were preceded by race-based plans (roughly two-fifths). In the many cases where a weak SES-based plan (e.g., relied on voluntary transfers that did not impact many students) replaced a race-based one, the researchers found evidence of *increasing* segregation by race and SES. In the handful of cases where a strong SES-based plan (e.g., a comprehensive assignment plan that reached most or all students in a system) was adopted or when a district employed a SES-based plan never having been under a race-based one, the plan was linked to a modest reduction in SES segregation with no impact on racial segregation.¹¹

Drawbacks of using simple SES measures to promote integration

If we consider again the strategies these plans rely upon to achieve SES diversity, the lackluster results become easier to understand. First, we traditionally have not had good measures of student poverty. Free and reduced lunch eligibility is a dichotomous measure—either you are poor or you are not, which ignores highly meaningful variations in income levels. As mentioned previously, recent alternative measures of SES have not benefited from empirical work examining their relative

effectiveness. Second, though there is a strong relationship between race and poverty, it is imperfect. In 2016, 12 percent of white children lived in poverty, compared to 37 percent of black children and 32 percent of Latino children.¹² Though these figures showcase a deep disparity between the shares of white and black and Latino children living in poverty, they also highlight the existence of a substantial majority of black and Latino children who are not poor, and a large number of white children who are poor. In terms of actual numbers, there are a million more white children in poverty than black children.¹³ Third, the relationship between race and poverty also varies widely across communities. A recent study of U.S. metros found that the racial and economic segregation work independently of one another to

A STRONG RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RACE AND POVERTY EXISTS, YET REAL NUMBERS REVEAL GREATER NUMBERS OF WHITE CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY¹³



11 Reardon and Rhodes, "The Effects of Socioeconomic School Integration Plans."

12 Wallman, K. (2016). *America's Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2016*. Washington, DC: Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics.

13 There were 4.85 million white children living in poverty, and 3.93 million black children in households in poverty. The most children of any race/ethnicity living in poverty were Hispanic children at 5.66 million. See <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/44-children-in-poverty-by-race-and-ethnicity#detailed/1/any/false/869,36,868,867,133/10,11,9,12,1,185,13/324,323>

produce spatial patterns of separation. In most metros with sizeable black populations, economic segregation contributed to less than 10 percent of the racial segregation of neighborhoods.¹⁴ This is important because residential patterns of segregation by race and poverty come into play when SES integration plans rely on attendance zones. In a district where racial groups are separated by substantial geographic distances, regardless of income, it may be more difficult to draw attendance zones that are integrated by race as well as SES.

“In a district where racial groups are separated by substantial geographic distances, it may be more difficult to draw attendance zones that are integrated by race as well as SES.”

These general issues were outlined in a 2006 simulation of the impact of SES-based plans on racial integration, which found that the implementation of even the strongest SES-based plans (e.g., student assignment driven by family income levels and seeking to ensure perfect SES balance across schools) in 89 urban districts would likely leave high levels of racial segregation in place.¹⁵ Reardon et al’s simulation suggested that SES plans that used more nuanced measures of SES beyond a binary FRL measure would likely be associated with higher racial integration, though it also depends on the neighborhood and population characteristics in a district.

“SES plans that used more nuanced measure of SES would likely be associated with higher racial integration.”

Similar findings, for different reasons, prevail in higher education. Another simulation, again out of Stanford, found that SES-based affirmative action policies, while effective in producing SES diversity at selective colleges, do not produce nearly the amount of racial diversity on college campuses as race-based policies do.¹⁶ The reverse was also true: race-based policies did not effectively achieve SES diversity.¹⁷ From these higher education results the authors conclude that the correlation between race and SES is not high enough for one to act as a workable substitute for the other.

Using more nuanced SES factors and neighborhood racial composition to achieve stronger results

So what does work to produce racial and economic diversity in educational settings? Perhaps unsurprisingly, mounting evidence from K-12 and higher education indicates that policymakers should consider both race and income factors together as the best approach. In the words of the researcher who documented differing patterns of racial and economic segregation in our metros, “Scholars and policymakers concerned with reducing educational disparities in educational attainment need to address both racial and economic segregation, given that both contribute

14 Jargowsky, P. (2014). “Segregation, Neighborhoods, and Schools.” Pp. 97-136 in Annette Lareau and Kimberly Goyette, eds., *Choosing Homes, Choosing Schools: Residential Segregation and the Search for a Good School*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

15 Reardon, S.F., Yun, J.T, & Kurlaender, M. (2006). “Implications of Income-Based School Assignment Policies for Racial School Segregation.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 28(1): 49-75.

16 Reardon, S.F., Baker, R., Kasman, M., Klasik, D., & Townsend, J.P. (2015). “Simulation Models of the Effects of Race- and Socioeconomic-Based Affirmative Action Policies.” Working Paper. Stanford, CA: Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University.

17 Ibid.

independently to the educational isolation of low-income children.”¹⁸

“Racial and economic segregation... both contribute independently to the educational isolation of low-income children.”

In the K-12 world, this might take the form of plans that consider both racial and SES factors of a given geographic unit like neighborhoods and then strive to assign to schools students from different kinds of neighborhoods. Louisville and Berkeley implement policies that include racial and SES characteristics of students’ neighborhoods and grant students’ school preferences in order to achieve diversity.¹⁹ This would be analogous to a two-pronged affirmative action strategy in the higher education context, both SES- and race-based.²⁰ To achieve a more accurate SES profile of neighborhoods than student free and reduced

To achieve a more accurate SES profile of neighborhoods than student free and reduced lunch eligibility status, plans can look at:

- parent income and education level,
- percentage of single parent households,
- percentage of homeowners,
- eligibility for government programs targeting low-income families.

lunch eligibility status, plans can look at parent income and education level,²¹ as well as percentage of single parent households, percentage of homeowners, or eligibility for government programs targeting low-income families.²² Rising inequality and rapidly shifting racial and ethnic demographics make these more nuanced approaches to integration vital to both the K-12 and higher education arenas.

18 Jargowsky, “Segregation, Neighborhoods and Schools.”

19 Frankenberg, E. (2017). Assessing segregation under a new generation of controlled choice policies. *American Educational Research Journal*; Richards, M.P., Stroub, K.J., & Vasquez Heilig, J. (2012). Achieving diversity in the Parents Involved era: Evidence for geographic integration plans in metropolitan school districts. *Berkeley Journal of African-American Law and Policy*, 14.

20 Reardon et al, “Simulation models on the effects of...”

21 In fact, some studies reviewed here have suggested that parental education is a better metric for socioeconomic status.

22. See, e.g., “Choice, diversity and schools: How the new CMS magnet lottery will work” (*Charlotte Observer*, Nov. 3, 2016), available at <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/education/article112262392.html>

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By Jennifer Ayscue, Erica Frankenberg, & Genevieve Siegel-Hawley



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