

# From All Walks of Life

## New Hope for School Integration



BY RICHARD D. KAHLBERG

Sixteen years ago—back when Bill Clinton and Bob Dole were battling for the presidency and Michelle Rhee was still a graduate student—I began researching a book suggesting that we should find creative ways to educate more students in economically integrated school environments. It was a very old and profoundly American idea and, at the same time, novel and mostly unexplored in practice.

On the one hand, the idea of economically integrated schools runs deep in American history. In 1837, Horace Mann, who famously argued that public education should be “the great equal-

izer,” wrote that in order to serve that role, public schools had to be “common schools,” by which he meant institutions in which “the children of all classes, rich and poor, should partake as equally as possible in the privileges” of the enterprise.<sup>1</sup> The idea of socioeconomic integration received a big boost more than 100 years later with the publication of the 1966 Coleman Report. Coleman’s analysis—examining 600,000 students in 4,000 schools—found that the socioeconomic status of your classmates mattered a great deal to your academic performance. The report concluded that “the social composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independent of the student’s own social background, than is any school factor.”<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, in 1996, when I began researching the topic of socioeconomic integration, almost no American school districts explicitly sought an economically integrated student body. Racial integration was a widely recognized goal, but racial desegregation was seen mostly as a legal remedy for the crime of de jure segregation and as a desirable social goal for society at large.

Racial integration is a very important aim that I fully support, but if one’s goal is boosting academic achievement, the research from Coleman (and subsequent studies) found that what really

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY PAUL ZWOLAK

matters is economic integration. Indeed, UCLA professor Gary Orfield, a strong proponent of racial desegregation, notes that “educational research suggests that the basic damage inflicted by segregated education comes not from racial concentration but the concentration of children from poor families.”<sup>3</sup> In Louisville, Kentucky, for example, a racial integration plan produced one school that was nicely integrated by race but was 99 percent low income—and struggled.<sup>4</sup>

The research is clear. Low-income students in middle-class schools (in which less than 50 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) are surrounded by: (1) peers who, on average, are more academically engaged and less likely to act out than those in high-poverty schools (in which at least 50 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch\*); (2) a community of parents who are able to be more actively involved in school affairs and know how to hold school officials accountable; and (3) stronger teachers who have higher expectations for students.<sup>5</sup>

In 1996, I could only identify one school district in the entire country—La Crosse, Wisconsin—that consciously sought to promote socioeconomic integration of its schools. And when I visited the town, I found that La Crosse’s policy, that all elementary schools should aim to have between 15 and 45 percent of the student body eligible for free lunch, had been highly controversial. In 1999, after I published a few articles about socioeconomic integration in newspapers and magazines, I began getting calls from reporters in a second, much larger district, Wake County (Raleigh), North Carolina, which was discussing a plan to limit the proportion of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch to 40 percent at all schools. Slowly, policy was beginning to catch up to where the research had long been pointing: to the need to break up concentrations of school poverty.

In 2001, I published *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice*, which laid out the research basis for socioeconomic integration and provided profiles of La Crosse and Wake County. In the years since then, I’ve written numerous essays and reports on the topic, including a 2007 profile of the growing number of school districts pursuing socioeconomic integration.<sup>6</sup> Earlier this year, the Century Foundation, where I work, published a volume of essays that I edited: *The Future of School Integration: Socioeconomic Diversity as an Education Reform Strategy*. It highlights the research of a new generation of scholars on the topic and identifies more than 80 school districts, educating 4 million students, that pursue socioeconomic integration. During the past 16 years, I’ve written on other topics—including teachers’ unions, private school vouchers, No Child Left

Behind, inequality in higher education (affirmative action and legacy preferences), and labor organizing—but socioeconomic school integration has been an important and consistent thread in my work.

Over the years, I’ve been dismissed as politically naive, called racist for pointing to evidence that low-income students perform better in middle-class schools, and, worst of all, ignored by progressive Democratic administrations, which by my lights, should get fully behind a policy showing enormous promise for low-income students. In this essay, I sketch the considerable obstacles I’ve faced in promoting socioeconomic school integration—and explain what keeps me going.

## Strong Resistance

In the past 16 years, I have encountered enormous resistance from conservatives, and even some liberals, to the idea of providing poor kids a chance to attend middle-class schools. Some

conservatives and tea party activists resurrect the specter of “forced busing” from the 1970s, even though today’s integration relies on public school choice, magnet schools, and incentives, rather than compulsion. Others, such as Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, suggest that working one’s way up to buy a house in a good neighborhood with good schools for your children is the American way, even though equal educational opportunity for children, whether or not their parents can afford to live in a good neighborhood, is fundamental to the American Creed.<sup>7</sup>

Some liberals worry that the focus on socioeconomic integration will somehow shortchange the commitment of *Brown v. Board of Education* to integration by race. They don’t openly acknowledge that race and class are closely connected, and that socioeconomic integration offers significant legal advantages due to a 2007 US Supreme Court ruling curtailing the ability of districts to employ race.<sup>8</sup> Some advocates of the poor worry that policies seeking to break up concentrations of poverty send the insulting signal that “poor kids can’t learn,” even though precisely the opposite is true: it is because poor kids can learn that it’s important to provide them with the right educational environment. At one meeting, my discussion of the evidence on the negative impact of concentrated poverty was labeled “borderline racist.”

Finally, most policymakers—on both the left and the right—shy away from socioeconomic school integration because they think it’s politically safer to try to make “separate but equal” institutions for rich and poor work, even though no one knows how to make high-poverty schools work at scale, and there are many established ways to make socioeconomic integration politically palatable.

As a result of the opposition from both conservative and liberal quarters, socioeconomic school integration is not part of the national policy discussion in Washington, DC. Instead, 95 percent of the education discussion takes economic segregation as an immutable fact of life and focuses on trying to “fix” high-poverty

Racial integration is a very important aim, but if one’s goal is boosting academic achievement, what really matters is economic integration.

\*In this article, “high-poverty schools” are defined as those in which at least 50 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Some studies set different thresholds. For example, in *The Condition of Education 2012*, the US Department of Education defines high-poverty schools as those in which more than 75 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

schools (usually in ways that high-quality research does not support, but the ineffectiveness of most popular reform ideas is beyond the scope of this article).

So why, in the face of such bipartisan resistance, do I stick with it? And why do I think there is even some hope for progress on socioeconomic integration in the future? I am motivated by two central factors. The first is the serious body of research evidence—which has grown dramatically in the past decade—demonstrating that socioeconomic integration is one of the most important tools available for improving the academic achievement, and life chances, of students.

The second impetus for me is the courage, commitment, and intelligence of local superintendents, school board members, businesspeople, civil rights leaders, principals, parents, teachers, and students in dozens of local communities who are showing that it is possible to create politically viable and successful economic integration programs. And when I get especially discouraged, I am heartened by the personal stories I hear from individuals who suggest that having the chance to attend an economically integrated school made all the difference in their lives.

### The Growing Research Evidence

When *All Together Now* was published in 2001, there was a very strong research base for socioeconomic integration; I cited dozens of studies—from the 1966 Coleman Report through a 1997 congressionally authorized longitudinal study of 40,000 students—finding that over and above individual students' socioeconomic status (SES), as the poverty level of the school goes up, the average achievement level goes down. In the last decade, the research has become even more convincing. A 2010 review of 59 studies on the relationship between a school's SES and outcomes in math found "consistent and unambiguous evidence" that higher school poverty concentrations are linked with less learning for students "irrespective of their age, race, or family's SES."<sup>9</sup> To cite some examples:

- In 2005, an analysis of a large data set found that a school's SES had as much impact on the achievement growth of high school students in math, science, reading, and history as a student's individual economic status.<sup>10</sup>
- Analyzing data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), researchers recently concluded that the academic successes of nations like Finland and Canada appear to be related in part to their greater degrees of socioeconomic school integration.<sup>11</sup> Finland—often held out as a remarkable education success story—had the very lowest degree of socioeconomic segregation of 57 countries participating in PISA.<sup>12</sup>
- What may be the largest study analyzing school integration and achievement used math exams required under the No Child Left Behind Act and examined data from 22,000 schools enroll-

ing 18 million students. Published in 2006, the study found that minority students have greater gains in racially integrated schools, and that "a substantial portion of the 'racial composition' effect is really due to poverty and peer achievement."<sup>13</sup>

- In 2010, a reanalysis of Coleman's data using a more sophisticated statistical technique found that the social class of the school matters even more to student achievement than does the SES of the family.<sup>14</sup>
- In 2012, researchers found a strong statewide correlation between socioeconomic school segregation and the size of the achievement gap between low-income and higher-income students. Examining achievement gaps on the National Assessment of Educational Progress for math and reading in 2007 and 2009,<sup>15</sup> they found that black and Latino students had smaller achievement gaps with white students when they were less

likely to be stuck in high-poverty school environments. Policymakers often point to different levels of performance of minority students in different states and suggest that teacher practices and school leadership may be possible explanations. In fact, variations in socioeconomic isolation, a factor not often mentioned, may play a significant role.

### Rigorous Research Yields Strong Results

Some of the strongest evidence to date was published in 2010: a carefully controlled study examined students and families who were

randomly assigned to public housing units in Montgomery County, Maryland, a diverse and high-achieving district outside Washington, DC. It found very large positive effects as a result of living in lower-poverty neighborhoods and attending lower-poverty elementary schools.<sup>16</sup>

This research took advantage of a rare opportunity to compare two education approaches. On the one hand, the Montgomery County school district has invested substantial extra resources (about \$2,000 per pupil) in its lowest-income schools (dubbed the "red zone") to employ a number of innovative educational approaches. On the other hand, the county also has a long-standing inclusionary housing policy that allows low-income students to live in middle- and upper-middle-class communities and attend fairly affluent schools (dubbed the "green zone").

Thus, Montgomery County offers an interesting experiment: Do low-income students perform better in higher-poverty schools that receive greater resources, or in more-affluent schools with fewer resources? Which matters more for low-income students: extended learning time, smaller class size, and intensive teacher development programs—all made available in Montgomery County's higher-poverty schools—or the types of advantages usually associated with schools in which the majority of students come from affluent families, such as positive peer role models, active parental communities, and strong teachers?

The results were unmistakable: low-income students attending

Finland—often held out as an education success story—had the lowest degree of socioeconomic segregation of 57 countries participating in PISA.

more-affluent elementary schools (and living in more-affluent neighborhoods) significantly outperformed low-income elementary students who attend higher-poverty schools with state-of-the-art educational interventions. By the end of elementary school, students living in public housing who attended the most-affluent schools cut their initial, sizable math achievement gap with nonpoor students in the district by half. For reading, the gap was cut by one-third.

What is particularly remarkable about the comparative success of students in public housing attending Montgomery County's more-affluent schools is they weren't besting students stuck in lousy schools but rather students in schools that saw improvement. Indeed, the school system's interventions in its less-affluent red zone schools have been generally effective and widely lauded. The investment in red zone schools helped decrease the countywide achievement gap with whites in third-grade reading from 35 percentage points in 2003 to 19 points in 2008 for African Americans, and from 43 points to 17 points for Hispanics.<sup>17</sup>

The success of this red zone/green zone intervention deserves acclaim. But it was Montgomery County's long-standing "inclusionary zoning" housing policy that has had a far more pronounced positive educational effect. Under a policy adopted in the early 1970s, developers of large subdivisions are required to set aside between 12 percent and 15 percent of units for low-income and working-class families. The housing authority purchases up to one-third of the inclusionary zoning homes to operate as public housing apartments that are scattered throughout the county. Families eligible for public housing enter a lottery and are randomly assigned to public housing apartments.

The study has national significance not only because it found a very large longitudinal effect from economic integration, but also because it helps answer a question about whether the superior performance of low-income students in more-affluent schools nationwide is simply an artifact of self-selection. The study controls for the fact that more motivated low-income families may scrimp and save to get their children into good schools by comparing students whose families were *assigned by lottery* into red zone and green zone schools. (And, unlike research based on charter school lotteries, the attrition rate in Montgomery County public housing is extremely low.)\*

It found the achievement benefits extended to students in

\*On the surface, this study would seem to contradict results from a federal housing income integration program known as Moving to Opportunity (MTO), which saw few academic gains for children. But MTO involved students who moved to schools that were mostly still high poverty, with an average free or reduced-price lunch population of 67.5 percent (compared with a control group attending schools with 73.9 percent of students receiving subsidized lunches). The Montgomery County experiment allowed low-income students to attend some very low-poverty schools, similar to the wildly successful Gautreaux program in Chicago.<sup>18</sup>

public housing attending schools with up to 30 percent low-income student populations. Does this suggest that 30 percent is a "tipping point," after which low-income students generally will cease to benefit from economically integrated schooling? Not likely. The vast majority of the schools in the sample had low-income populations of between 0 percent and 60 percent. Because other research has found that the negative effects of concentrated poverty are compounded in very high-poverty schools, it may well be that low-income students in, say, 30 to 50 percent low-income schools perform better than students in 60 to 100 percent low-income schools, but (partly because of the housing policy) Montgomery County does not have enough truly high-poverty schools to test the hypothesis.



One interesting question raised by the study is to what extent students benefited from living in more-advantaged neighborhoods, compared with attending more-advantaged schools. It finds that roughly two-thirds of the benefit comes from the school, and one-third from the neighborhood. This suggests there may be considerable value in programs that integrate at the school level alone, though greater benefits clearly accrue from integration at both the neighborhood and school levels.

#### Effect on Middle-Class Students

The Montgomery County study did not look specifically at the effect on the achievement of middle-class students in

integrated schools, but a large number of studies have. This research consistently finds that integration is not a zero-sum game: low-income students can benefit from economically integrated schools, and middle-class achievement does not decline so long as a strong core of middle-class children is present.<sup>19</sup> The research on racial integration found similar results: test scores of black students increased and white students' scores did not decline.<sup>20</sup>

Research suggests<sup>21</sup> low-income students can benefit in economically mixed schools, and middle-class students are not hurt, for two central reasons. First, the numerical majority sets the tone in a school: the negative effects of concentrated poverty tend to kick in only where a clear majority of students are low income. Second, middle-class children are less affected by school influences (for good or ill) than low-income children. This "differential sensitivity" to school environment, one of the central findings of the 1966 Coleman Report, has been dubbed "Coleman's Law." The reason, Coleman explained, is straightforward: aspirations and achievement are more firmly rooted for those with strong family backgrounds; those with weaker family backgrounds, who spend less time under adult supervision, are more open to the influence of peers—a finding consistently reached by researchers.

#### Research on Costs and Benefits

Opponents of integration at the school level often raise questions about the costs of such programs. Because our residential

areas are segregated, school integration (as opposed to housing integration) involves expenses associated with bus transportation. Critics of integration often ask, shouldn't money spent on bus transportation be more fruitfully employed on classroom education itself? It is a nice political slogan, but as the Montgomery County research demonstrates, integration can produce far better achievement gains than pouring extra funds into high-poverty schools. And, the total public and private return on investment in socioeconomic integration appears to greatly exceed the costs.

When compared with other countries, school spending in the United States does not appear cost-effective, yet little attention has been paid to the question of whether our relatively high rates of economic school segregation play a role in this problem. Recently, one researcher completed what I believe is the only rigorous cost-benefit analysis of economic school integration.<sup>22</sup>

Because most economic segregation occurs between districts rather than within them, the study estimates the costs and benefits of a model in which two-way, interdistrict, public school choice programs are enacted. And because of the political obstacles to integration under old-style compulsory busing plans, it examines the costs of two types of incentives for middle-class families to participate voluntarily in integration: the creation of magnet schools (which adopt special themes or pedagogical approaches) to attract middle-class students to disadvantaged areas by choice, and financial incentives to entice more-affluent schools to accept low-income transfer students voluntarily.

Rather than examining the effects of complete socioeconomic integration (which is probably unachievable), the study looks at the effect of reducing socioeconomic segregation by one-half nationally—a level of integration enjoyed in many individual communities already. In order to cut economic segregation in half, roughly one-fourth of low-income students would need to transfer to more-affluent schools while roughly one-fourth of more-affluent students would need to transfer to newly created magnet schools located in more-disadvantaged neighborhoods.

The study estimates the costs of creating magnet programs with special themes and pedagogical approaches (including transportation costs, special teacher training, and additional equipment) at roughly 10 percent greater than the costs of regular public school education. Likewise, it estimates the cost of creating financial incentives to “magnetize” low-income students in order to make transfers attractive to middle-class schools at a 10 percent premium overall. (This funding premium is far more generous than several existing metropolitan interdistrict integration programs in places such as Boston and Hartford, Connecticut.) Averaged out over all pupils, the per-pupil net present value of total costs over seven years

of integrated schooling is estimated to be \$6,340.

In measuring the benefits, the study examines the effects on high school graduation rates (as opposed, say, to academic achievement) because there is a broad consensus among researchers about the economic benefits of graduating. The net lifetime public benefit of having a student graduate high school is estimated at \$209,200 (in constant dollars), coming in the form of increased tax revenue due to greater earnings, as well as decreased health care spending, criminal justice system costs, and spending on welfare.

Averaged out over all students, the public benefit per student is more than \$20,000, and the combined public and private benefits amount to about \$33,000 per student, far exceeding the cost of \$6,340 per student. Put differently, the public return on investment in socioeconomic integration exceeds costs by a factor of

3.3 and the total return (public and private) exceeds costs by a factor of 5.2. These returns exceed almost all other investments in education, including private school vouchers, reduced class size, and improvements in teacher quality. The only educational intervention known to have a greater return on investment is very high-quality early childhood education.

While these returns are quite good, they probably undervalue the full benefits of socioeconomic integration for a number of reasons. The study uses a conservative estimate of the impact of socioeconomic integration on

high school graduation rates; individual districts such as St. Louis and Hartford have seen larger rises in graduation than the 10-percentage-point increase it relies upon. It employs conservative estimates of the economic benefits of high school graduation. It estimates only the benefits that magnet schools bring because of socioeconomic integration, excluding potential ancillary benefits from providing a closer fit between student interests and curriculum. It does not count the civic benefits to our democracy of having more highly educated citizens, nor the benefits to the children of high school graduates in the form of improved life chances. And it does not count the benefits to the workplace of having employees who know how to get along with workers of different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds.

In sum, rather than representing a diversion of funds to “busing” or transportation, spending that reduces socioeconomic school segregation appears to be among the wisest possible investments in all of education.

### Districts' Experiences

In addition to the growing research, the other thing I've found heartening over the years is the growth in socioeconomic integration at the local level. While socioeconomic school integration has made few inroads on the federal level, one of the greater advantages of our decentralized system of schooling is that individual states and districts can experiment with research-based



ideas, whether or not they are in fashion with Washington movers and shakers.

### The Growth of Local Socioeconomic Integration Plans

In 1999, I gave a talk on socioeconomic school segregation, citing the wide body of research on its effects, and *Washington Post* reporter David Broder asked me where socioeconomic integration was being pursued. At that time, I could only point to La Crosse, a district with fewer than 8,000 students. Today, however, there are 80 districts using socioeconomic status as a factor in student assignment, educating some 4 million students. The districts are large (Chicago) and small (Burlington, Vermont); northeastern (Amherst, Massachusetts), southern (Jefferson County, Kentucky), western (San Diego), and midwestern (Omaha, Nebraska). Districts measure socioeconomic status by looking at a student's eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, or by examining census data, including such factors as parental education, single-parent household status, and income.

Four forces appear to be driving the socioeconomic integration movement. First, as a matter of law, integrating by socioeconomic status offers substantial advantages over integrating by race.<sup>23</sup> After the Supreme Court struck down racial integration plans in Seattle and Louisville, many districts seeking to preserve racial diversity turned to socioeconomic plans to achieve diversity without using race per se, given the overlap between race and class in our society.

Second, districts, under increasing pressure to raise the achievement of low-income and minority students, are beginning to heed the growing evidence suggesting that one of the most effective ways to do so is to give low-income and working-class students a chance to attend predominantly middle-class schools. Although the media shower tremendous attention on high-poverty public schools and charter schools that have positive results, district leaders know that it is extremely difficult to make high-poverty schools work on a systemwide, long-term basis.

Third, in an era of tight budgets, some school districts appear to be attracted to socioeconomic integration as a more cost-effective means of raising student achievement than pouring additional dollars into high-poverty schools. In North Carolina, for example, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has sought to raise achievement through an innovative pre-K program and extra expenditures in high-poverty schools; by contrast, Wake County has sought to raise achievement through socioeconomic integration. Both had measures of success, but according to a recent study, Wake County's integration approach was more cost-effective.<sup>24</sup>

Fourth, the problem of concentrated poverty is growing, and the districts grappling with the issue are no longer just those in urban areas. According to the US Department of Education, 50 percent of elementary school students now attend schools in

which the majority of students are low income; between 2000 and 2010, the proportion of majority low-income schools grew by almost 60 percent (from about 29 percent to about 45 percent, with the numbers being estimates because 7 to 15 percent of schools did not provide data).<sup>25</sup> A 2010 report, *The Suburbanization of Poverty*, found that in the nation's largest metropolitan areas, more poor people live in large suburbs than in their primary cities, meaning poor pockets are now more prevalent in the suburbs than in the past.<sup>26</sup>

Socioeconomic integration is being applied very broadly—in suburban areas that once had little poverty and even in urban areas that are overwhelmingly poor. In 2008, I received a call from educators in Chicago who were interested in constructing a socioeconomic plan. How does one do so in a district that is 85 percent low income? The answer: try to integrate a subset of magnet and

selective enrollment schools where a critical mass of middle-class students are interested in attending. I worked with the district for more than a year to develop a plan that divided residential census tracts into four socioeconomic tiers and sought to ensure that desirable schools had economic diversity. The plan was adopted in November 2009 and is still in existence. When I told a colleague about my work with Chicago, the third-largest school district in the country, he responded, "We're not in La Crosse anymore, Toto."

### The Politics of Socioeconomic Integration

Despite the growth of socioeconomic school integration plans at the local level, the consensus in Washington, DC, is that integration is politically toxic. Andrew Rotherham, writing in *Time* magazine in October 2010, for example, acknowledged the educational achievement benefits of socioeconomic school integration but questioned the political feasibility.<sup>27</sup> The column nicely captures the paradox of integration: there is a consensus on the part of educational researchers that allowing low-income students to attend middle-class schools raises academic achievement and also an unfortunate Washington political consensus that there is not much we can do to encourage the practice. But might that enduring political belief be outdated?

Rotherham wrote: "Parents who are paying the high property taxes that often accompany high-performing public schools are zealously protective of access to that amenity."

Of course, this argument violates the education reform movement's mantra: "it's about the kids, not the adults." Moreover, we've learned a great deal about how to integrate schools since compulsory busing in Boston circa 1976. Programs now rely not on mandates but on incentives to encourage voluntary integration: special magnet programs to lure middle-class students into schools in low-income areas, and financial incentives for schools in suburban districts to accept low-income transfer students. In

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Cambridge, Massachusetts, for example, all schools have been designated magnet schools, each with something distinctive to offer. Parents rank their preferences among schools, and the district honors choices in a way that ensures all schools are within plus or minus 10 percentage points of the system's average eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch.

The most sophisticated plans poll parents ahead of time, asking them what sort of themes or pedagogical approaches would attract them to attend a school farther away. In Hartford, for example, I visited a wonderful Montessori school, located in a tough neighborhood with boarded-up houses nearby, that has a long waiting list of white, middle-class suburban families because the school at the end of the bus ride is attractive to them.

In addition, the “neighborhood school” does not have the same resonance it had three decades ago. Although Americans are divided on private school vouchers, they overwhelmingly support giving greater choice and options to students within the public school system.<sup>28</sup> The share of families choosing a non-neighborhood public school increased by 45 percent between 1993 and 2007.<sup>29</sup> Choice almost always requires transportation, but the old ideal of the child who walks or bikes to school is pretty much a thing of the past anyway, as only 13 percent do so today, compared with nearly half in 1969.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, a growing share of Americans now recognize that diversity is a good thing for all students. Many families now believe—as do virtually all leading colleges and universities—that racial, ethnic, and income diversity enriches the classroom discussion and that students cannot learn how to live in a multicultural society in a segregated white school.

Nevertheless, the politics of integration can be tough.

I've traveled to Wake County on numerous occasions over the last decade. It's a flash point for the socioeconomic integration movement, demonstrating both the political challenges and how they can be overcome.<sup>31</sup> The Wake County district, which encompasses the city of Raleigh and the surrounding suburban areas, has received a great deal of media attention in recent years for the political controversy surrounding its socioeconomic integration plan. The 18th-largest school district nationally, Wake is the largest district in North Carolina, with more than 140,000 students. The 800-square-mile district was created in 1976 by the merger of the Raleigh and suburban Wake school districts. The district's student population is 49 percent white, 25 percent African American, 15 percent Latino, and 6 percent Asian, with 33 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.<sup>32</sup>

In the early 1980s, Wake County adopted a voluntary racial integration plan with the goal that all schools should be between 15 and 45 percent black. In order to achieve integration largely through choice, almost all of the Raleigh schools were turned into magnets. In 2000, given legal concerns about the use of race, and a sense

among school researchers that poverty concentrations were of great educational concern, Wake County shifted to a socioeconomic diversity plan, with a goal that no school should have a student population that is more than 40 percent low income.

For many years, academic achievement rose, the program drew wide support, and pro-integration candidates continued to be elected to the school board. But over time, Wake County became, in a sense, the victim of its own success. In part because the schools were highly regarded, Wake County's business climate thrived, new families moved to the area, and large numbers of students were added each year. In order to accommodate skyrocketing growth, increasing numbers of students were reassigned to fill new schools, generating anger among parents. Moreover, increasing numbers

of families relocated from other areas of the country, and the newcomers did not fully understand the county's history of integration and its importance as an educational strategy.

At the same time, the booming economy attracted a large influx of Latino families, many of them low income. A relatively small presence in 2000, Latinos made up nearly one in six students by 2010, creating a new challenge to maintaining the 40 percent low-income cap in any given school. Parental anger at the school district peaked when exploding

growth led some families to have their children mandatorily assigned to schools with a staggered year-round calendar (rather than a traditional schedule with summers off) in order to make better use of building capacity.

In October 2009, with an influx of funding from conservative interests, including the tea party and the Koch brothers, opponents of the socioeconomic integration plan gained a 5-4 majority on the school board and vowed to establish a system of neighborhood schools.<sup>33</sup> The majority did succeed in officially eliminating the 40 percent low-income cap for schools, but it ran into major community resistance in efforts to establish a system of de facto segregated neighborhood schools.

Resistance to resegregation came from an interesting coalition of civil rights groups and teachers on the one hand, and white magnet school parents and business leaders on the other. Furthermore, critical centrist voters became disillusioned with the conservative school board majority following a series of events, which I'll briefly review.

Let's begin with the resignation of superintendent Del Burns, a deeply principled man I've come to know well. Burns said that he could not, in good conscience, play a part in resegregating Wake County schools. Then, when the school board moved to immediately reassign a small number of low-income and minority students, the NAACP filed a complaint with the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. An accreditation agency also began reviewing Wake County's status.

Civil rights groups, including the NAACP, organized protests at board meetings, which drew national attention, including a front

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page *Washington Post* story highlighting the turmoil. Television comedian Stephen Colbert ridiculed Wake County's board, suggesting, "What's the use of living in a gated community if my kids go to school and get poor all over them?" By 2011, a survey of local residents found that 51 percent viewed the school board unfavorably, compared with just 29 percent who viewed it favorably.

The Chamber of Commerce, which supported integration as a way of strengthening schools and preparing employees to work with a diverse set of colleagues, commissioned a plan, released in February 2011, to use public school choice to accommodate growth and also produce diversity. The plan tweaked the earlier socioeconomic goal to employ diversity measured by academic achievement, a very close cousin of socioeconomic status. It was clear that business leaders did not appreciate national publicity suggesting that a world-class community was planning to consciously resegregate its schools.

In the fall 2011 school board elections, Democrats swept into office, ousting the Republican school board chair who had led the effort for neighborhood schools. As of this writing, the Wake County situation is still in flux, but it appears that the school district is likely to embrace a third way. Eschewing both a continuation of integration by mandatory assignment and proposals to resegregate through neighborhood

schools, policymakers appear ready to pursue the hybrid: integration by socioeconomic status with some element of school choice.

Jefferson County (Louisville) provides an interesting contrast with Wake County. A coalition of civil rights groups, teachers, and the business community organized early to support integration and, thus far, avoid a conservative school board takeover.

Like Wake County schools, the Jefferson County schools (which educate 100,000 students, 36 percent of whom are black, 51 percent white, and 60 percent low income) were created by a merger of city and suburban schools in the mid-1970s. After a period of court-ordered mandatory busing for racial desegregation, Jefferson County schools adopted a plan, in the mid-1990s, using magnet schools to create racial integration, with the goal that all schools should be between 15 and 50 percent black. In 2002, white parents sued, charging that the use of race in student assignment violated the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause, and in 2007, the US Supreme Court agreed.

Jefferson County leaders did not give up on integration, however, and in 2008, the county adopted a new plan that emphasizes SES, along with race, in student assignment. Instead of looking at each student's race or SES, the county's plan looks at the geographic areas in which students live and labels them as either Area A (having below-average income and education levels, and above-average minority population) or Area B (the converse). In the plan, students choose the schools they want to attend, and

county officials honor choices with an eye to having Area A students constitute between 15 and 50 percent of the student body.

In the 2010 school board elections, supporters of diversity feared they might face the same upheaval that Wake County felt in its 2009 elections, but in fact, a pro-integration school board majority remained in power. How was Jefferson County able to avoid most of the political turmoil associated with the Wake County plan? It appears that teachers and the business community, cognizant of what had happened in Wake County, aggressively supported pro-diversity candidates with strong financial contributions. By emphasizing the choice mechanism, Jefferson County also avoided the large-scale redistricting that so angered

many Wake County parents. According to a recent district survey, 80 percent of parents in Jefferson County favor retaining a diversity component in the student assignment plan.

Looking broadly at the experiences in Wake County and Jefferson County, three lessons emerge about how to make socioeconomic integration politically sustainable. First, public school choice is a far more popular way to promote integration than compulsory assignment. Choice gives parents a feeling of "ownership," and magnet school offerings provide students with special themes or pedagogical approaches to match their particular interests. As illustrated in Wake County, choice can also provide a much better way to accommodate rapid

growth in student populations because schools can be filled through election rather than reassignment.

Choice and incentives can also make interdistrict integration more politically palatable. Strong financial incentives could encourage middle-class schools to accept more low-income transfers. Just as the right kind of magnet themes or pedagogical approaches have successfully drawn affluent students into schools in tougher neighborhoods, programs that "magnetize" low-income students can overcome opposition to interdistrict choice.

Second, constant communication on the part of school officials and community groups regarding the rationale for integration policies is critical, particularly in communities such as Wake County, which have seen large increases in new families. To be effective, civil rights groups should build strong alliances with other groups that support integration, including the business community, teachers, and magnet school parents. Teachers, who know firsthand that they can do a better job in economically integrated schools than in those with overwhelming concentrations of poverty, have been at the forefront of battles to integrate schools by economic status in such communities as La Crosse, Louisville, and Wake County.

Third, national leadership matters. Support from US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and even the comedian Stephen Colbert, may have helped make a difference in turning the Wake





County public against a school board seeking to resegment the public schools.

### Logistical Obstacles

In addition to raising overblown political worries, Washington pundits often raise logistical concerns about connecting low-income students with middle-class schools. In his *Time* magazine piece, for example, Rotherham claimed that there is too much distance between low-income students and middle-class schools to make school integration feasible, citing a 2008 study suggesting that, at most, 20 percent of students could transfer from struggling urban schools to better-performing suburban ones within a 20-minute driving distance.<sup>34</sup> But long-standing experience suggests that low-income students in cities such as Boston, Hartford, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis are willing to endure longer bus rides if what's at the end of the ride is a superior education. Indeed, some of these programs have lengthy waiting lists of students, whose families sign up when the children are born.<sup>35</sup>

And new research concludes that class segregation is not an “immutable reality,” as some suggest. What appears to be the first national estimate of the viability of socioeconomic school integration finds that “dramatic reductions in the number of high-poverty schools across the United States are within reach.”<sup>36</sup> (In this study, high-poverty schools are defined as those in which at least 50 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.)

The study draws upon the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data from 2007–2008 in 46 states, and it focuses on students in public elementary schools because subsidized lunch eligibility data at that level are thought to be more reliable than in middle and high schools, where students may avoid the program because they feel stigmatized when receiving free or reduced-price meals. It concludes that the potential for reducing the number of low-income schools through intradistrict solutions is relatively modest\* in most states—but the potential of interdistrict programs is significant.

To examine the potential impact of interdistrict integration plans, the authors examine six sample states: Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, and Virginia. In modeling the effects, they assume, rather conservatively, that transfers would only be made to contiguous school districts. (In fact, many existing interdistrict integration plans, such as the Boston METCO program, involve students traveling farther distances to noncontiguous suburban districts.)

They conclude that the benefits of interdistrict programs range widely, from reducing the number of high-poverty schools by 7

percent in Florida to 52 percent in Nebraska. Virginia could see a 36 percent reduction, Colorado and Massachusetts could each see a 34 percent reduction, and Missouri a 17 percent reduction. Taking intra- and interdistrict strategies together could result in substantial reductions of high-poverty schools in five of these six states. While Florida would see a relatively modest 13 percent reduction, two states would see a reduction of more than one-third (37 percent each in Missouri and Massachusetts), and three states would see a reduction of more than one-half (52 percent in Colorado, 58 percent in Nebraska, and 60 percent in Virginia).

In sum, the authors conclude, a great deal could be done to reduce the proportion of high-poverty public elementary schools in the United States, especially if we pursued interdistrict socioeconomic integration strategies.



### Tracking Issues and Student Success

Finally, Washington critics raise questions about whether tracking within schools will undercut integration's positive benefits. Rotherham, for example, argues that even though low-income students generally do better in more affluent schools, these schools are not “consistently effective at educating low-income students.” Pointing to gaps in achievement between different demographic groups within affluent schools, he notes, “students can be segregated within schools as well as from them.” This is a very legitimate concern, and steps need to be

taken to ensure that integrated school

buildings are not resegmented by classroom. But it's important to note that the study of Montgomery County found that low-income students assigned to low-poverty schools generally were tracked into lower reading and math groups and *still* performed substantially higher in math than low-income students assigned to higher-poverty schools with lots of extra educational programs.

Indeed, part of what keeps districts like Wake, Cambridge, and La Crosse going is the successful results for students. One professor known for doing in-depth studies of urban schools wrote that Wake County “reduced the gap between rich and poor, black and white, more than any other large urban educational system in America.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, research shows that over the years, Wake County's low-income, minority, and white students have generally outperformed comparable students in other large North Carolina districts that do not break up concentrations of poverty. La Crosse has also had favorable results. And in Cambridge, the graduation rates of low-income and minority students exceed those of comparable students in Boston and statewide in Massachusetts, as the figure on page 13 indicates.

### Fighting the Battles in Washington, DC

Although socioeconomic integration is being pursued in an increasing number of districts, it has failed to make inroads in federal policy, so I've tried to connect the concept to key ideas

\*Overall, states could reduce the number of high-poverty schools by 15 percent with intradistrict strategies, benefiting 1.5 million students.

that are being promoted by the Obama administration, such as school turnarounds and charter schools.

### Magnets as School Turnarounds

One of the signature initiatives of Education Secretary Arne Duncan is the ambitious effort to turn around America's lowest-performing schools. Duncan noted that for years districts allowed failing schools to slide and has called, instead, for "far-reaching reforms" that fundamentally change the culture in the country's worst 5,000 schools.<sup>38</sup> Ironically, Duncan's approach, which focused almost entirely on changing the faculty and school governance, was itself too timid.

Duncan has written that in Chicago, "we moved the adults out of the building, kept the children there, and brought in new adults."<sup>39</sup> But the exclusive focus on changing the principal and teachers is questionable, given that teachers and administrators in impoverished schools generally lack adequate support and resources. It also misses two-thirds of the larger school community—which includes students and parents as well. This partial turnaround approach in Chicago was met with "mixed" results.<sup>40</sup> The Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago noted in a 2009 report that "most students in the Chicago Public Schools continue to fail."<sup>41</sup>

At bottom, the central flaw with Duncan's move-the-adults strategy is that it unnecessarily treats socioeconomic segregation as acceptable, thereby condemning children to very difficult learning environments. In high-poverty schools, a child is surrounded by classmates who are less likely to have big dreams and, accordingly, are less academically engaged and more likely to act out and cut class. Classmates in high-poverty schools are more likely to move during the school year, creating disruption in the classroom, and less likely to have large vocabularies, which in turn limits the ability of peers on the playground and in the classroom to learn new words.

Parents are also an important part of a school community. Students benefit when parents regularly volunteer in the classroom and know how to hold school officials accountable when things go wrong. Low-income parents, who may be working several jobs, may not own a car, and may have had bad experiences themselves as students, are four times less likely to be members of a PTA and only half as likely to volunteer.<sup>42</sup>

The student and parent makeup of a school, in turn, profoundly affects the type of teachers who can be recruited. Polls consistently find that teachers care more about "work environment" than they do

about salary. They care about school safety, whether they will have to spend large portions of their time on classroom management, and whether parents will make sure kids do their homework. That is why it is so difficult to attract and keep great teachers in high-poverty schools, even when bonuses are offered.

In 2009, I wrote a report arguing that the most promising "turn-around" model is one that recognizes these realities and seeks to turn high-poverty schools into magnet schools that change not only the faculty (if needed) but also the student and parent mix in the school.<sup>43</sup> Failing schools can be shuttered and reopened with new themes and pedagogical approaches that attract new teachers and a mix of middle-class and low-income students. Meanwhile, some low-income students from the old school can be given the opportunity to fill the spots vacated by higher-income children who had been attending more-affluent schools.

The Obama administration has never endorsed this idea, sticking to the vain hope that firing teachers and bringing in nonunion charters will solve our problems. However, the idea did catch the attention of staff for Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee chairman Tom Harkin, who asked me to brief them on the policy. In October 2011, the bipartisan HELP Committee's proposal for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act included magnet schools as a turnaround school option.<sup>44</sup>

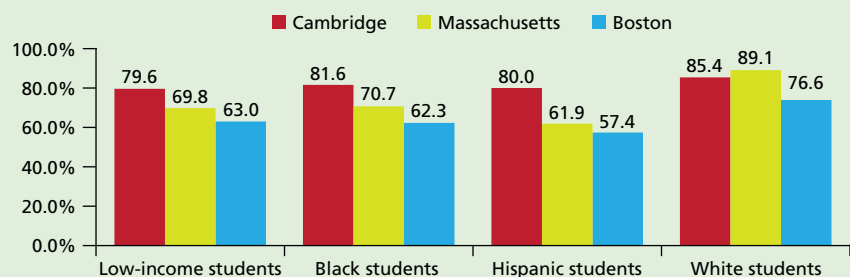
**In high-poverty schools, a child is surrounded by classmates who are more likely to act out, more likely to move during the school year, and less likely to have large vocabularies.**

### Integrated Charter Schools

Likewise, my colleagues and I at the Century Foundation have tried to interject the principle of socioeconomic integration into the charter school debate. As schools of choice, charters have the potential to be more economically integrated than regular public schools, but they are in fact more segregated, as funders and policymakers have prioritized high-poverty "no excuses" charter schools like KIPP. (See "High-Flying High-Poverty Schools" on page 8.)

Still, I'm heartened that an emerging subset of charter schools

### Cambridge Compares Favorably with Massachusetts and Boston on Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rates



SOURCE: MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION, COHORT 2011 FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATE REPORT, [HTTP://PROFILES.DOE.MASS.EDU/STATE\\_REPORT/GRADRATES.ASPX](http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/gradrates.aspx). 2012 DATA WERE NOT AVAILABLE AS OF PRESS TIME.

are consciously seeking a socioeconomic mix by locating in economically integrated neighborhoods, drawing students from multiple school districts, or employing weighted student lotteries.<sup>45</sup>

**T**he pursuit of socioeconomic integration policies remains a seesaw for me. As I was writing this piece, UC Berkeley professor David Kirp wrote a very strong lead article in the *New York Times* Sunday Review section, citing impressive evidence about the positive benefits of racially integrated schools. He noted that even the grandchildren of those who escaped segregated schools performed better, but then, stuck in the old race-based paradigm, concluded, “the hostile majority on the Supreme Court and the absence of a vocal pro-integration constituency make integration’s revival a near impossibility.”<sup>46</sup> Omitted was any reference to the legally viable socioeconomic integration movement or the teachers, business leaders, and civil rights groups that have helped enact these policies across the country.

At the same time, there are signs of progress. At a May 2012 conference of civil rights activists, school officials, and policymakers commemorating the 58th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, participants continually cited Wake County’s courageous and effective socioeconomic integration plan. And every once and a while, an unlikely ally emerges. After Kirp’s piece ran, I participated in a *New York Times* “Room for Debate” forum, urging socioeconomic integration, and I was startled to see Michelle Rhee, too, endorse socioeconomic integration, citing plans in La Crosse and Cambridge. She wrote: “Research shows socioeconomic integration clearly benefits low-income kids. It benefits wealthier students as well; people educated in diverse schools say as adults they work better with people who are demographically different from them.”<sup>47</sup>

I’ve been highly critical of Rhee’s attack on teachers’ unions in venues like *Slate* and the *Washington Post*.<sup>48</sup> I don’t expect her to give up her fixation on unions, but I do hope to help convince others of a fundamental but too-often-ignored truth: the major problem with American schools is not teachers or their unions, but poverty and economic segregation. That’s what the research suggests. It’s what 80 school districts have come to realize. And, until federal officials catch up, it’s what I will continue to push them to acknowledge. □

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In Aesop's fable "The Frog and the Ox," a frog tries to puff himself up to the size of an ox and bursts in the process. We have seen many a reform burst, not because it was too big per se, but because it puffed itself beyond its actual worth. To gauge the worth of education reform, we must hold it up against our best conception of education. This conception must build slowly; it must be grounded in literature, mathematics, history, and other subjects. If we let these subjects guide us, if we make room to contemplate, absorb, and discuss what they hold, we will not get lost. Or, if we do, we can call up those things we have learned and, through the recalling and reviving, find our way again. □

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10. For the sake of simplicity, I treat the terms "college" and "university" as near-synonyms here, but they refer to institutions with different purposes and histories. For more on the distinction, see Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 67–101.
11. Delbanco, *College*, 32–33.
12. Terence J. G. Tracey and Steven B. Robbins, "The Interest-Major Congruence and College Success Relation: A Longitudinal Study," *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 69, no. 1 (August 2006): 64–89.
13. Many districts have implemented career education programs in elementary and middle schools. In 2005, the South Carolina Legislature passed the Education and Economic Development Act, which includes the mandate that all middle school students must take a career inventory to help determine their career major in high school. See SC Commission on Higher Education, "South Carolina Education and Economic Development Act," [www.che.sc.gov/AcademicAffairs/EEDA/EEDA.htm](http://www.che.sc.gov/AcademicAffairs/EEDA/EEDA.htm). For a critique of the "dropout billionaire," see Frank Donoghue, "Idolizing Dropouts: The Real Issues," *Innovations* (blog), *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 23, 2012.
14. For more information on these programs, see their respective websites: [www.dallasinstitute.org](http://www.dallasinstitute.org); [www.yale.edu/ynhti](http://www.yale.edu/ynhti); and [www.bard.edu/mat](http://www.bard.edu/mat). I am on the faculty of the Dallas Institute's Sue Rose Summer Institute for Teachers.
15. Robert Frost, "Birches," *Mountain Interval* (New York: Henry Holt, 1916), 37–40.
16. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso* 13.94–102.
17. Jan Marthedal Rasmussen, "Arithmetic by Geometry," *Kanooth* (blog), April 24, 2010, [www.kanooth.com/blog/2010/04/arithmetic-by-geometry.html](http://www.kanooth.com/blog/2010/04/arithmetic-by-geometry.html).
18. G. H. Hardy, *A Mathematician's Apology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 98.