

Racial Diversity in Schools: Some of the Benefits

Over the past forty years, policy makers have completely ignored issues of racial segregation while focusing almost exclusively on high-stakes accountability, even as our schools have become increasingly segregated and unequal.

Wells, Fox & Cordova-Cobo (2016)

In 2007, segregation in U.S. schools was reported as deepening. Estimates indicated that less than 2 million students were enrolled in desegregated schools. The estimate in 2019 was that only about 4 million students were enrolled in school districts or charter schools with socioeconomic integration policies. The lack of integration has been attributed to a host of factors, such as the decreasing proportion of whites in the population, courts ending desegregation plans, residential segregation spreading, and “choice plans” that have no civil rights requirements (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2007).

In 2014, a minority-majority landmark occurred in U.S. public schools; the combination of Latino, African-American, and Asian students surpassed the number of white students. This demographic change is reflected in school districts across the country.

In 2021, public school districts have an average diversity score of 0.68 (indicating the likelihood that two students chosen at random are of different ethnicities). Racial diversity varies by state, as well as by school district (Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019). Hawaii is the most diverse state, Vermont the least. Currently, the most diverse school district is the Federal Way School District in D.C. with a diversity score of 0.80 (Diversity in US Public Schools, 2021).

Some Benefits of Racial Diversity for Integrated Schools

Growing diversity has both benefits and costs for students and schools. Our focus here is on potential benefits for academic performance, intergroup relations, and long-term life outcomes.

Available research supports the view that racial and socioeconomic diversity in schools can produce academic, cognitive, civic, social, emotional, and economic benefits. The following list is taken and adapted from a compilation by the Century Foundation (2019). See that source for the research and other works they drew upon.

Academic & Cognitive Benefits

“On average, students in socioeconomically and racially diverse schools – regardless of a student’s own economic status – have stronger academic outcomes than students in schools with concentrated poverty.” Students in integrated schools

- have higher average test scores
- are more likely to enroll in college
- are less likely to drop out

Integrated schools and classrooms also have been reported as helping reduce racial achievement gaps and encourage critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity.

*The material in this document reflects work done by Mia Cervantes as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2021.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

**Civic and
Social-
Emotional
Benefits**

“Racially and socioeconomically diverse schools offer students important social-emotional benefits by exposing them to peers of different backgrounds. The increased tolerance and cross-cultural dialogue that result from these interactions are beneficial for civil society.” Diverse and integrated schools are associated with

- reductions in racial bias and stereotyping
- students’ reduced anxiety, satisfaction, intellectual self-confidence, and leadership skills
- how people treat racial and ethnic groups and individuals who seek out integrated settings later in life.

**Economic
Benefits**

“Providing more students with integrated school environments is a cost-effective strategy for boosting student achievement and preparing students for work in a diverse global economy. School integration efforts produce a high return on investment. recent estimate, reducing socioeconomic segregation in our schools by half would produce a return on investment of times the cost of the programs. Attending an integrated school can be a more effective academic intervention than receiving extra funding in a higher-poverty school.” Diverse and integrated schools are associated with

- more equitable access to resources
- preparation of students to succeed in a global economy
- more productive, more effective, and more creative teams
- higher earnings as adults, improved health outcomes, and less likelihood of incarceration.

One of the Studies on Favorable Long-term Life Outcomes

In 2011, Rucker Johnson reported research on “the long-run impacts of court-ordered school desegregation on an array of adult socioeconomic and health outcomes.”

His abstract:

The study analyzes the life trajectories of children born between 1945 and 1968, and followed through 2013, using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). The PSID data are linked with multiple data sources that describe the neighborhood attributes, school quality resources, and coincident policies that prevailed at the time these children were growing up. I exploit quasi-random variation in the timing of initial court orders, which generated differences in the timing and scope of the implementation of desegregation plans during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Event study analyses as well as 2SLS and sibling-difference estimates indicate that school desegregation and the accompanied increases in school quality resulted in significant improvements in adult attainments for blacks. I find that, for blacks, school desegregation significantly increased both educational and occupational attainments, college quality and adult earnings, reduced the probability of incarceration, and improved adult health status; desegregation had no effects on whites across each of these outcomes. The results suggest that the mechanisms through which school desegregation led to beneficial adult attainment outcomes for blacks include improvement in access to school resources reflected in reductions in class size and increases in per-pupil spending.

A College Study of Racial Diversity and Cognitive and Academic Outcomes

In 2004, Antonio and colleagues conducted the first study in which students were randomly assigned to conditions of racial diversity to directly examine cognitive and academic outcomes.

Article Abstract

An experiment varying the racial (Black, White) and opinion composition in small-group discussions was conducted with college students (N = 357) at three universities to test for effects on the perceived novelty of group members' contributions to discussion and on participants' integrative complexity. Results showed that racial and opinion minorities were both perceived as contributing to novelty. Generally positive effects on integrative complexity were found when the groups had racial- and opinion-minority members and when members reported having racially diverse friends and classmates. The findings are discussed in the context of social psychological theories of minority influence and social policy implications for affirmative action. The research supports claims about the educational significance of race in higher education, as well as the complexity of the interaction of racial diversity with contextual and individual factors.

Note: The construct of integrative complexity (IC) is "the degree to which cognitive style involves the differentiation and integration of multiple perspectives and dimensions" (Suedfeld et al., 1992). Simple reasoning, for example thinking in terms of "good" or "bad," is considered low-IC, whereas high-IC individuals consider and incorporate different perspectives and proposals when interpreting events and making decisions. In the above study each group included one collaborator, who was either Black or White. Prior to discussion, participants were asked first to write a short essay describing their position on the target social issue that would be discussed. They then engaged in an unstructured 15 minute discussion in which the collaborator followed a script that either agreed or disagreed with the opinions participants indicated on an initial screening survey. After the discussion, participants wrote a post discussion essay on the same target social issue topic. After finishing this essay, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement for a separate social issue within a separate essay.

Current Integration Policies Affecting Racial Diversity in Schools

In 2007, the Supreme Court limited consideration of race in K-12 voluntary school integration policies (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No 1*, 2007). The court ruled that school districts are first required to consider race-neutral options for integration before considering race.

While school integration did increase between 2017 and 2020, most integration efforts occurred at the local level. At the federal level, not only has there been little positive effort, in 2017 a federal grant to support school integration was canceled, and plans regarding non regulatory guidance on voluntary racial integration were revoked shortly thereafter.

Current integration policies tend to focus on socioeconomic factors; only a few consider racial or the intersection of socioeconomic, racial, or other diversity concerns. A nationwide survey reports that "185 districts and charters consider race or socioeconomic status in their student assignment

or admissions policies; and an additional 722 districts and charters are subject to legal desegregation order or voluntary agreement" (Potter & Burris, 2020).

The 185 districts and charters with integration policies have a significantly more racially diverse student population compared to overall U.S. school districts. About a quarter of these districts are under some form of legal desegregation order. While the 722 districts and charters are all subject to a legal desegregation order or voluntary agreement, no details about specific integration policies are available.

As to the future, here is a comment to think about from Richard D. Kahlenberg; Director of K–12 Equity and Senior Fellow at the Century Foundation:

What can give integration real political momentum are not the documented benefits to low-income students, but the emerging recognition that middle- and upper-class students benefit in diverse classrooms.

For more on benefits for all, see *How racially diverse schools and classrooms can benefit all students* by Amy Stuart Wells, Lauren Fox, and Diana Cordova-Cobo (2016).

Concluding Comments

A diverse society needs and benefits from well-integrated schools. And the diversity includes race, ethnicity, economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, immigrant status, language background, and differences in motivation and development.

Those concerned with promoting diversity in schools stress that integration efforts could be improved by renewing court oversight and enforcement as well as implementing new policies at federal and state levels. At the same time, there are ongoing calls for enhancing the diversity of teacher and administrative staffing at schools, as well as the diversity represented in the curriculum. The problem remains that integrating schools is profoundly political, and the politics continues to overwhelm efforts to address diversity in ways that benefit students and society.

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