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Research Brief

The Complementary Benefits of Racial and Socioeconomic Diversity in Schools

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Brown v. Board of Education declared in 1954 that racially segregated schools were unequal, invalidating laws requiring segregation of black and white students in seventeen states. Since then, legal decisions have furthered racial desegregation in schools and more recent decisions have arguably impeded it. Desegregation by race has been the focus of these efforts because race is a protected group under the Fourteenth Amendment. Yet as the courts have made it more difficult to consider race when trying to promote diverse schools, advocates and policymakers have proposed socioeconomic integration, arguing that it has important benefits for students. Are the benefits of racial diversity in schools interchangeable with socioeconomic status (SES) diversity?

This research brief explores what is known about the importance of both racial and economic diversity in K-12 schools. We first review research on the benefits of racial diversity, then research about the benefits of SES diversity. Finally, we examine the research findings regarding the benefits of racial diversity when accounting for SES.

Our review of the research suggests that both racial and SES diversity are beneficial to students, particularly low-income students and students of color, especially when within-school practices like classroom assignment ensure equal access to opportunity. We also find that research supports the conclusion that the benefits that flow from racial and SES diversity are not interchangeable. Policies should ensure that schools are both racially and economically diverse in order to produce maximal benefits to students and their communities.

The benefits of racial diversity

Racial diversity has numerous benefits, including improved academic achievement, enhanced intergroup relations, and positive long-term life outcomes. Each is important for developing community well-being and social cohesion.

Racially diverse learning environments have positive impacts on academic achievement for students of all races.¹ Students of color achieve at higher levels in racially diverse schools than in segregated schools.² In addition, the earlier that students experience desegregated learning

- 1 Wells, A.S., Fox, L., & Cordova-Cobo, D. (2016). *Research fact sheet: The educational benefits of diverse schools and classrooms for all students*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- 2 Hallinan, M. (1998). Diversity effects on student outcomes: social science evidence. *Ohio State Law Journal*, 59, 733-754. Linn, R., & Welner, K. (2007). *Race-conscious policies for assigning students to schools: Social science research and the Supreme Court cases*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Education. Mickelson, R. A. (2008). Twenty-first century social science research on school racial diversity and educational outcomes. *Ohio State Law Journal*, 69, 1173-1228. Mickelson, R. A., & Nkomo, M. (2012). Integrated schooling, life course outcomes, and social cohesion in multiethnic democratic societies. *Review of Research in Education*, 36, 197-238.

environments, the greater the positive impacts on academic success.³ Students who attend desegregated schools are less likely to drop out of high school.⁴ For white students attending racially diverse schools, there is no detrimental impact on academic achievement.⁵

Alongside academic achievement, racially diverse schools are also beneficial for intergroup relations. Based on intergroup contact theory, which posits that contact between members of different groups leads to a reduction in prejudice,⁶ a meta-analysis of more than 500 studies confirms that increased contact between members of different groups can have positive impacts on all groups by reducing prejudice, negative attitudes, and stereotypes while at the same time increasing friendships among members of different groups.⁷ In examining school settings in particular, Tropp and Prenovost found

that intergroup contact theory operates similarly in schools as it does in other environments.⁸

Attending racially diverse schools contributes to greater comfort with peers of diverse backgrounds and better understanding of their perspectives as well as improvements in critical thinking, communication, and problem solving.⁹

Racially diverse schools also have positive long-term effects on life outcomes. A study of adults who were born between 1945 and 1968 and followed through 2013 found that for black adults, there were significant improvements in long-term outcomes associated with desegregated schooling, including increased educational and occupational attainment, higher college quality and adult earnings, reduction in the likelihood of being incarcerated, and better health.¹⁰ Earlier research also found that desegregation is related to higher

- 3 Mickelson, R. A. (2005). The incomplete desegregation of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and its consequences, 1971-2004. In J. C. Boger & G. Orfield (Eds.), *School resegregation: Must the South turn back?* (pp. 87-110). Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- 4 Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. E. (2004). Locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation's dropouts? In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation crisis* (pp. 57-84). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press. Schofield, J. W. (2001). Maximizing the benefits of a diverse student body: Lessons from school desegregation research. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Diversity challenged* (pp. 99-110). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group. Swanson, C. B. (2004). Sketching a portrait of public high school graduation: Who graduates? Who doesn't? In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 13-40). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- 5 Crain, R. L., & Mahard, R. (1983). The effect of research methodology on desegregation achievement studies: A meta-analysis. *American Journal of Sociology*, 88(839-854).
- 6 Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- 7 Pettigrew, T., & Tropp, L. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751-783.
- 8 Tropp, L. R., & Prenovost, M. A. (2008). The role of intergroup contact in predicting children's interethnic attitudes: Evidence from meta-analytic and field studies. In S. R. Levy & M. Killen (Eds.), *Intergroup attitudes and relations in childhood through adulthood* (pp. 236-248). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- 9 Kurlaender, M., & Yun, J. (2001). Is diversity a compelling educational interest? Evidence from Louisville. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Diversity challenged* (pp. 111-141). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group. Kurlaender, M., & Yun, J. T. (2007). Measuring school racial composition and student outcomes in a multiracial society. *American Journal of Education*, 113(2), 213-242. Page, S. (2008). *The difference: How the power of diversity creates better groups, firms, schools, and societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. See also, in higher education context, Chang, M. J., Denson, N., Saenz, V., & Misa, K. (2006). The educational benefits of sustaining cross-racial interaction among undergraduates. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 77(3), 430-455.
- 10 Johnson, R. C. (2011). Long-run impacts of school desegregation and school quality on adult attainments *NBER Working Paper Series*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

occupational attainment for minorities.¹¹ Further, individuals who attend desegregated schools develop a deeper understanding of other groups and greater comfort in interracial settings, which lasts into adulthood.¹² When individuals have early and sustained experiences in desegregated schools, they are more likely to live and work in desegregated environments later in life.¹³

Racially diverse schools are beneficial not only for individuals but also for the economic and democratic well-being of communities and society.¹⁴ Institutions of higher education have recognized this for many decades. In *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the Court's opinion drew on briefs filed by the military and leading U.S. businesses to assert the need for a diverse education that supports the development of cross-cultural experiences and understandings that are required for success in the global marketplace and the increasingly diverse and multiracial U.S.

society.¹⁵ Most recently, in *Fisher II*, Fortune 100 companies filed a brief again emphasizing the importance of a diverse education for preparing individuals to succeed in the diverse and global work environment.¹⁶ In addition to economic benefits to society, students who attend racially diverse schools have high levels of civic engagement and feel prepared to participate in democratic processes with diverse groups of people.¹⁷ In higher education, a study in nine public universities found that meaningful, positive interactions with diverse college peers are related to a variety of cognitive, social, and democratic outcomes, including problem-solving skills, cultural awareness, interest in social issues, perspective taking, concern for the public good, and a pluralistic orientation.¹⁸ The short-term and long-term benefits of racially diverse schools provide the structural and attitudinal foundation for social cohesion in multiethnic, democratic societies such as the United States.¹⁹

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- 11 Trent, W. T. (1997). Outcomes of school desegregation: Findings from longitudinal research. *Journal of Negro Education*, 66(3), 255-257.
- 12 Wells, A. S., Holme, J. J., Revilla, A. T., & Atanda, A. K. (2009). *Both sides now: The story of school desegregation's graduates*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- 13 Braddock, J. H., II, & Gonzalez, A. D. C. (2010). Social isolation and social cohesion: The effects of k-12 neighborhood and school segregation on intergroup orientations. *Teachers College Record*, 112(6), 1631-1653. Braddock, J. H., & McPartland, J. M. (1989). Social-psychological processes that perpetuate racial segregation: The relationship between school and employment desegregation. *Journal of Black Studies*, 19(3), 267-289. Stearns, E. (2010). Long-term correlates of high school racial composition: Perpetuation theory reexamined. *Teachers College Record*, 112(6), 5-6. Wells, A. S., & Crain, R. L. (1994). Perpetuation theory and the long-term effects of school desegregation. *Review of Educational Research*, 64(4), 531-555.
- 14 Wells, A. S., Fox, L., & Cordova-Cobo, D. (2016). *How racially diverse schools and classrooms can benefit all students*. New York: The Century Foundation.
- 15 Consolidated Brief of Lt. Gen. Julius W. Becton, Jr. et al. as Amici Curiae Supporting Respondents, *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003). Brief for 65 Leading American Businesses as Amici Curiae Supporting Respondents, *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).
- 16 Brief of Fortune-100 and Other Leading American businesses as Amici Curiae Supporting Respondents, *Fisher v. University of Texas*, 579 U.S. ____ (2016).
- 17 Kurlaender, M., & Yun, J. (2001, 2005, 2007). Kurlaender, M., & Yun, J. (2001). Is diversity a compelling educational interest? Evidence from Louisville. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Diversity challenged* (pp. 111-141). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group. Kurlaender, M., & Yun, J. (2005). Fifty years after Brown: New evidence of the impact of school racial composition on student outcomes. *International Journal of Educational Policy, Research and Practice*, 6(1), 51-78. Kurlaender, M., & Yun, J. T. (2007). Measuring school racial composition and student outcomes in a multiracial society. *American Journal of Education*, 113(2), 213-242.
- 18 Hurtado, S. (2005). The next generation of diversity and intergroup relations research. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61(3), 595-610.
- 19 Mickelson, R. A., & Nkomo, M. (2012). Integrated schooling, life course outcomes, and social cohesion in multiethnic democratic societies. *Review of Research in Education*, 36, 197-238.

The benefits of SES diversity

Fifty years ago, the Coleman Report found that the SES of students' peers was one of the important predictors of a child's academic achievement, and the most important school factor.²⁰ Since that time, there have been numerous re-analyses of this report (and its underlying data) as well as other studies examining whether and how socioeconomic diversity relates to student achievement. Many studies of the effects of school diversity include race along with SES—and advocates for SES policies often cite evidence about racial diversity—which illustrates the many ways in which these concepts overlap. Below, we describe evidence that specifically pertains to socioeconomic diversity.

A study of Montgomery County, Maryland highlights the relationship between economic desegregation and academic outcomes. The study found that after five to seven years, low-income students who had been randomly assigned to attend low-poverty schools outperformed their low-income peers who had been attending moderate-poverty schools.²¹

Studies using more recent national datasets continue to show the importance of school SES com-

position.²² Indeed, a recent analysis concluded that a review of studies published in the last ten years using nationally representative data concluded that students in lower SES schools had lower academic outcomes than students in higher SES schools.²³ One study found that, for high school students, the mean SES of the student body had as much impact on students' achievement group as an individual student's SES.²⁴ A separate analysis by these same authors found that a school's SES composition was particularly important in the South. In testing the mechanisms as to why school SES mattered, they found that structural school factors (such as location, size of school, whether it was public or private) explained most of the effects of SES.²⁵ A study of student achievement using NAEP data found that students who are not low-income but who attend schools with high shares of low-income students have lower achievement than low-income students attending affluent schools.²⁶

In addition to an achievement gap, research has also found a relationship between socioeconomic composition of high school and educational attainment. There is an attainment gap between high and low-poverty schools, which in 2001 was 18 percentage points different—or bigger than the

20 Coleman, J. S., Campbell, E. Q., Hobson, C. J., McPartland, J., Mood, A. M., Weinfeld, F. D., et al. (1966a). *Equality of educational opportunity*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

21 Schwartz, H. (2010). *Housing policy is school policy: Economically integrative housing promotes academic success in Montgomery County, Maryland*. New York: The Century Foundation.

22 There is no common definition across studies of what "low SES" or "high SES" schools are. One definition used by the Government Accountability Office in their study of school segregation was considering low-poverty schools to have less than 25% of students receiving free and/or reduced price lunch and high-poverty schools had more than 75% of students eligible for free and/or reduced price lunch.

23 Government Accountability Office. (2016). *Better use of information could help agencies identify disparities and address racial discrimination*. Washington, DC: Author.

24 Rumberger, R. W., & Palardy, G. J. (2005). Does segregation still matter? The impact of social composition on academic achievement in high school. *Teachers College Record*, 107, 1999-2045.

25 Rumberger, R. W., & Palardy, G. J. (2005). Does Resegregation matter? The impact of social composition on academic achievement in southern high schools. In J.C. Boger & G. Orfield (Eds.), *School resegregation: Must the south turn back?* (pp. 127-147). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

26 National Center for Education Statistics (2003). *The condition of education 2003*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education.

racial gap in high school diploma attainment.²⁷ Likewise, students attending schools with high SES were nearly 70% more likely than peers attending low SES schools to enroll in a four-year college or university, in part due to the peer effects in such schools.²⁸

Mechanisms explaining these findings relate to the types of peer expectations found in schools of concentrated poverty,²⁹ fewer challenging curricular offerings,³⁰ and the challenges of retaining high-quality, experienced teachers in high-poverty schools.³¹ These schools must also educate children with high mobility, children from households that lack space for children to do homework, and children who come to school hungry and/or have other health issues that affect their ability to focus on learning.³² Indeed, one of the reasons that economic diversity in schools is important to pursue is the range of impacts for children growing up in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty that may contribute to their entering kindergarten already at a disadvantage to peers in more affluent areas.³³

Such children have less access to books and other resources that help children's literacy development and prepare them for school;³⁴ schools of concentrated poverty have similar disadvantages in library resources.³⁵

The intersection between racial and SES diversity

One of the challenges of understanding the individual contributions of student racial composition and student socioeconomic composition to student outcomes is the fact that until recently relatively few studies included each factor separately as part of the research design.

The racial composition of school has educational impacts for students even when accounting for SES, according to a number of studies. One 2010 study reanalyzing the Coleman data using more sophisticated statistical techniques found that school socioeconomic and racial composition were much more important factors for student achieve-

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- 27 Swanson, C. (2004). Sketching a portrait of public high school graduation: Who graduates? Who doesn't? In Gary Orfield, (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* p. 29, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- 28 Palardy, G. J. (2013). High school socioeconomic segregation and student attainment. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(4), 714-754.
- 29 Rumberger, R.W. (2003). The causes and consequences of student mobility. *Journal of Negro Education*, 72, 6-21.
- 30 Monk, D. and Haller, E. (1993). Predictors of high school academic course offerings: The role of school size. *American Educational Research Journal*, 30(1), 3-21.
- 31 Darling-Hammond, L. (2001). Apartheid in American education: How opportunity is rationed to children of color in the United States, In T. Johnson, J. E. Boyden, & W. J. Pittz (Eds.), *Racial profiling and punishment in U.S. public schools* (pp. 39-44). Oakland, CA: Applied Research Center
- 32 Berliner, D. (2009). *Poverty and potential: Out-of-school factors and school success*. Boulder, CO and Tempe, AZ: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/poverty-and-potential>
- 33 Hilton, M. (2016) Residential segregation and brain development: Implications for equitable educational opportunities. In Frankenberg, E., Garces, L.M., Hopkins, M. (Eds.), *School integration matters: Research-based strategies to advance equity* (pp. 73-85). New York: Teachers College Press.
- 34 Neuman, S. B., & Moland, N. (2016). Book deserts: The consequences of income segregation on children's access to print. *Urban Education*, first published on July 5, 2016 as doi:10.1177/0042085916654525; Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and schools: Using social, economic, and educational reform to close the black-white achievement gap*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- 35 Pribesh, S., Gavigan, K., & Dickinson, G. (2011). The access gap: Poverty and characteristics of school library media centers. *The Library Quarterly*, 81, 143-160.

ment than Coleman and colleagues had concluded, and each were stronger predictors of student outcomes than were the individual racial or socioeconomic characteristics of that student.³⁶

Another study based on data from nearly 3,000 pre-K students, using sophisticated multi-level modeling techniques, found that language learning is significantly associated with the racial composition of pre-K classrooms and that the relationship persists independently of the SES composition.³⁷ A 2015 analysis of the relationship between school composition and performance on the “nation’s report card” found that black student achievement was lower in high density black schools, even after controlling for SES, than it was in schools with the lowest black density.³⁸

A recent analysis of school segregation and racial achievement gaps found a strong relationship between racial segregation and racial achievement gaps. To explore the mechanisms through which this occurs, this study used bivariate and partial correlations as well as regression analysis of a national data set of state accountability test scores from 2009 to 2012. Having analyzed 16 measures of segregation, Reardon identified the difference between the share of poor students in white students’ schools and the share of poor students in

black students’ schools as having the most powerful relationship with academic achievement gaps. This study suggests that racial disparities in exposure to poor students is the strongest mechanism responsible for racial achievement gaps.³⁹

Finally, there are mixed findings as to how the socioeconomic composition of schools affects students of different races, which could be due to differences in outcomes studied and/or the extent to which students in diverse SES schools are actually exposed to a mix of students from different income levels. For example, within higher-SES schools, one study uncovered disadvantages for low-income students, a finding that was more pronounced for students of color. In fact, lower-income white students experienced some advantages in more affluent schools in comparison to their peers in lower-SES schools but the opposite was true for students of color.⁴⁰ A separate study found that Hispanic students in southern high schools did not benefit from higher socioeconomic composition in the same way as other students, possibly due to tracking.⁴¹ At the same time, another study examining educational attainment found that black and Latino students were more likely to graduate than white students in high schools with higher percentages of more affluent students in the school.⁴² As is the case with racially

36 Borman, G. D., & Dowling, M. (2010). Schools and inequality: A multilevel analysis of Coleman's equality of educational opportunity data. *Teachers College Record*, 112(5), 1201-1246.

37 Reid, J. (2016). “Racial/ethnic diversity and language development in the pre-school classroom,” in Frankenberg, E., Garces, L. and Hopkins, M. *School integration matters* (pp.39-55). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

38 Bohrnstedt, G. (2015). *School composition and the black-white achievement gap*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

39 Reardon, S. F. (2016). School segregation and racial academic achievement gaps. *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 2(5), 34-57.

40 Crosnoe, R. (2009). Low-income students and the socioeconomic composition of public high schools. *American Sociological Review*, 74(5), 709-730. See also Palardy, G. J., Rumberger, R. W., & Butler, T. (2015). The effect of high school socioeconomic, racial, and linguistic segregation on academic performance and school behaviors. *Teachers College Record*, 117(12), 1-52.

41 Rumberger, R. W., & Palardy, G. J. (2005). Does resegregation matter? The impact of social composition on academic achievement in southern high schools. In J.C. Boger & G. Orfield (Eds.), *School resegregation: Must the south turn back?* (pp. 127-147). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

42 Ryabov, I. (2011). Adolescent academic outcomes in school context: Network effects reexamined. *Journal of Adolescence*, 34.

diverse schools, simply assigning students to schools in a manner that creates economic diversity will not produce desired outcomes without attending to the integration of students within diverse schools, providing professional development to teachers for diverse classrooms, and making other changes to ensure equitable inclusion of students from all backgrounds.

All of this research points toward a complicated interplay between the racial and SES contexts of schools, with racial composition mattering in important and different ways from SES composition.

Conclusion

The research presented here is absolutely clear on the importance of prioritizing racially *and* economically diverse schools. This body of research consistently illustrates the importance of school compositional effects on student outcomes. At the same time, it also suggests the importance of ensuring *within*-school integration in order to attain benefits for students. Beyond the research findings, the increasing polarization of our country along racial lines is a grim reminder of the

importance of exposing children to differences early in life in order to nurture understanding and empathy—rather than the fear and intolerance that grows from separation.

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The National Coalition on School Diversity (NCSD) is a network of national civil rights organizations, university-based research centers, and state and local coalitions working to expand support for government policies that promote school diversity and reduce racial and economic isolation in elementary and secondary schools. We also support the work of state and local school diversity practitioners. Our work is informed by an advisory panel of scholars and academic researchers whose work relates to issues of equity, diversity, and desegregation/integration.

These and other publications along with information on the National Coalition on School Diversity is available at www.school-diversity.org