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Research Brief

School Integration and K-12 Outcomes: An Updated Quick Synthesis of the Social Science Evidence

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Some sixty years after the 1954 Brown decision declared separate schooling inherently unequal, America's student population is much larger and more demographically diverse. For many decades court mandated desegregation² plans were implemented, but today public schools are again largely segregated by race, ethnicity, and family socioeconomic status (SES). Does this resegregation of schools matter? Educational outcomes remain strongly correlated with individual students' own race and family background. If schools' racial and SES compositions are not contributing factors to inequitable student outcomes, we might lament segregated schooling in moral terms but choose to concentrate our policy reform efforts on the educational factors that influence achievement and attainment. But the preponderance of high quality social, educational, and behavioral science research disseminated since the late 1980s is clear and consistent: the racial and SES composition of schools

influences short- and long-term outcomes. And segregation is harmful for all students.³

To be sure, teachers, curricula, and pedagogy are essential components of the opportunities to learn we give our students. But they are not the only important ones. The social organization of schools and classrooms also contributes to the quality of students' education. Whether a school or classroom is racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse or segregated makes a critical difference in K-12 achievement outcomes across the curriculum. Specific findings about the short-term academic benefits of attending a diverse school show:

- Higher achievement in mathematics, science, language and reading.⁴
- Benefits accrue to all students in all grades but are greatest in middle and high school

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- 2 Desegregation generally refers to creating schools with diverse racial and ethnic compositions, while integration connotes diversity of the student body's composition, its cultural climate, and the educational processes and contents employed in it.
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- 4 Ali, R., & Perez, T. E. (2011, December). Guidance on the voluntary use of race to achieve diversity and avoid racial isolation in elementary and secondary schools. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division and U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. Retrieved from <http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/edu/documents/guidanceelem.pdf>; Armor, D., & Watkins, S. (2006). School segregation and Black achievement: New evidence from the 2003 NAEP. In *The Benefits of Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Elementary and Secondary Education*, 28–49,

years, suggesting that the benefits cumulate over time.⁵

- Students from all racial and SES backgrounds benefit from diverse schools. Middle class

white youths experience benefits from diversity as well, although low-income and disadvantaged minority youth gain the most.⁶

note 4 continued

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5 Ibid, footnote 4.

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- The evidence of academic benefits is weakest for immigrant Asian and Latino English learners. Some research suggests English learners may benefit in the short term from attending schools with a critical mass of their coethnics, probably because doing so enhances the likelihood of their receiving appropriate English language programs at their school. However, other research notes that learning English is fostered by attending school with English speakers.⁷
 - There is no evidence that integrated schooling harms any demographic group at any age in any subject area.⁸
 - The benefits of racial diversity overlap with those of SES diversity, but each offers unique effects for learners.⁹
- The multiple benefits of attending desegregated schools are intergenerational, extending from grandparents who attended desegregated schools, through their own children to their grandchildren who continue to realize the many benefits.¹⁰
- There are many reasons all learners are likely to benefit from attending integrated rather than racially and SES segregated schools. Some of these include:
- Teachers and school leaders are more experienced and highly qualified.¹¹
 - Highly qualified teachers and leaders are less likely to transfer to other schools.¹²
 - Student populations are more stable.¹³
 - School climates are more supportive of learning and studying.¹⁴

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- 12 Jackson, K. (2009). Student Demographics, Teacher Sorting, and Teacher Quality: Evidence from the End of Desegregation. *Journal of Labor Economics*. 27 (2): 213-256; Lankford, H., Loeb, S. & Wyckoff, J. (2002) *Teacher Sorting and the Plight of Urban Schools: Descriptive Analysis* 24 *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. 24 (1): 37-62.
- 13 Ibid, footnote 3; Ibid, footnote, 4.
- 14 Ibid, footnote 3; Ibid, footnote, 4.

- Parent involvement is greater.¹⁵
- Greater resources are available in addition to the higher quality, more stable teacher resources.¹⁶

Because diverse K-12 schools are, on average higher functioning more stable organizations than racially or socioeconomically isolated schools, any curricular or pedagogic reforms implemented in them are more likely to be effective sooner and more lasting compared to reforms implemented in segregated schools, where steady turnover of staff and students undermine the implementation and sustainability of any reform efforts.¹⁷

Additionally, diverse K-12 schools are positively associated with better post-secondary outcomes integrally linked to adults' status attainment. Those who go to diverse K-12 school are likely to

- Graduate from high school.¹⁸
- Enter and graduate from college.¹⁹
- Enter a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) field.²⁰
- Have higher occupational and income attainment.²¹

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- Possess workplace readiness and interpersonal skills needed in the globalizing economy.²²

Integrated K-12 education is positively related to several important nonacademic outcomes essential for individual and societal well-being. These include:

- A reduction in individual levels of racial and ethnic prejudice.²³

- A break in the intergenerational perpetuation of stereotypes and fears of the “other.”²⁴
- An increase in cross-racial trust and friendships among youths and adults.²⁵
- An enhanced capacity for navigating multicultural settings.²⁶
- An increased likelihood of choosing to live in integrated neighborhoods.²⁷

21 continued

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- 24 Ibid, footnote 23.
- 25 Ibid, footnote 23. Tropp, L. R., Aron, A., Pettigrew, T.F., & Wright, S. C. (2011). Cross-group friendships and intergroup attitudes: A meta-analytic review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15, 332–351; Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90, 751–783.; Tropp, L. R., & Prenovost, M. (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; Stearns, E. (2010). Longterm correlates of high school racial composition: Perpetuation theory reexamined. *Teachers College Record*, 112, 1654–1678.
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- Better health and wellness among graduates of diverse schools.²⁸
- Less juvenile and adult involvement with the criminal justice system.²⁹

This quick synthesis of the empirical evidence from almost four decades of high quality social, educational, and behavioral science research additionally suggests that an integrated education can fosters

greater adherence to democratic values and enhances a person's propensity for civic engagement. Such long-term nonacademic outcomes help build civic capacity in communities and can serve as the building blocks for greater social cohesion. In these ways, integrated education prepares youth to be citizens who can fully participate in creating a multiethnic, just, democratic society.³⁰

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