

It's Complicated: Untangling the Discourse about Neighborhood Schools and Diversity

Neighborhood schools are often criticized for creating minority- or class-concentrated schools, limiting opportunities for diversity. They can, however, serve as strong community centers and allow students to walk to school, something advocates say may help the health problems in the United States. In this session, experts from around the country presented their experiences with neighborhood schools and diversity and as a group, the session tried to better articulate what it is we're looking for when we talk about "neighborhood schools."

- **Mary Filardo**, *Executive Director*, 21st Century School Fund
- **Lisa Donlan**, *President*, District 1 Community Education Council, NYC
- **Jennifer Jellison Holme**, *Assistant Professor Educational Policy and Planning*, University of Texas at Austin
- **Myron Orfield**, *Professor of Law and Director*, Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota Law School
- **Lia Epperson** *Associate Professor of Law*, American University Washington College of Law (moderator)

As people walked in the room, Lia Epperson asked everyone to respond to the question "Diversity and walkability: why is it complicated" on the blackboard. Then, to maximize the conversation, she had us work in small groups to consider barriers, opportunities, and models for maximizing diversity and walkability in schools. Groups found that barriers were plentiful, while opportunities were difficult, and models sparse.

The panelists each gave a brief presentation on their experience with neighborhood schools. Mary Filardo, using a paper she co-wrote as a framework, discussed the complexities of diversity and walkability. Lisa Donlan illustrated a model formerly used in the lower east side of Manhattan, but that disappeared when mayoral control centralized the city's public schools. Jennifer Jellison Holme then further complicated the issue by discussing her dissertation, where she explored the effect that education and schools have on families buying houses. Finally, Myron Orfield discussed a Twin Cities neighborhood school movement, in which, even with huge amounts of resources put into lower income schools, residents still fled and the project ultimately failed.

During the open discussion that followed, the session focused on three main questions. One, what are the origins for the want for neighborhood schools and for the segregation problems in these schools? Both panelists and participants suggested that there is an idealized concept of the neighborhood school in the American psyche. Coupled with this is a sense of right, of entitlement, to a neighborhood school. This led to a discussion on the complicated interrelationship between school segregation and residential segregation that also plays out with employment hubs and city planning.

The second large question was, what tools and solutions do we have to create walkable and diverse schools? The solutions discussed mainly focused on those origins and how to change them. Change city planning. Work on integrating housing. Talk about right to schools in a larger concept: the right for every child to attend a good school. These ideas, however, met more

questions. How could we accomplish some of these solutions? The nature of the problem is so intertwined with overall segregation in society that to try and fix one, we must try to fix them all. This complexity led to the question about the benefits of walkability. Could the health and obesity conversation in the United States contribute to the discussion surrounding walkability? This question led many in the group to express doubts about neighborhood schools helping to fix health issues facing our nation. Most people felt like the health conversation was covering up something larger.

This doubt opened the conversation to the largest question our group faced: is the push for neighborhood schools at all related to walkability and educational choice, or are these really just code words and masks for the actual purpose of maintaining a segregated society? First brought up by panelists and later pushed by participants, this question dominated the overall discussion. Most speakers felt that focusing on walkability shifts the discussion away from segregation while actually maintaining segregation throughout society.

Moving forward, it will be necessary to examine whether there is a need for neighborhood schools, and if so, how to make them diverse. Diversifying neighborhood schools implies a larger focus on societal segregation overall, and working to eradicate it on a systemic level. But the larger question remains: why do we want neighborhood schools? What language are we using to say that we want them? And is this all just a way of silently preferring a segregated society at large?