

How the Administration's "Stronger Together" school integration proposal built on the lessons learned from the flawed TASAP program

Issue Brief **7**

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In 2009, Congress allocated \$2.5 million for a competitive federal grant program, Technical Assistance for Student Assignment Plans (TASAP), that aimed to increase diversity in public schools, but which had only limited success. The Obama Administration's "Stronger Together" 2017 budget proposal (and the accompanying Stronger Together School Diversity Act of 2016) shows that the U.S. Department of Education (USED) has learned from the experience of TASAP, in the following ways.

- Stronger Together commits \$120 million in grants that will support voluntary programs for integration in PK-12 schools. Because TASAP had only \$2.5 million, each district's grants weren't big enough to create sustainable programs, but Stronger Together grants should be.
- Stronger Together separates planning grants from implementation grants. The TASAP grants went to school districts all at once, which meant that when several of the districts' projects drifted away from their original diversity goals, USED had no leverage to get them back on track. Projects that win Stronger Together planning grants will have to come up with solid plans for enhancing diversity in order to win implementation funding.
- Stronger Together requires community outreach and engagement. One of the problems with TASAP was that districts had only 30 days to prepare proposals for BOTH planning and implementation. As a result, there was

generally a lack of proactive involvement from community groups, which made it hard to build coalitions to support and sustain a commitment to diversity.

- Stronger Together grants may be awarded to school districts, educational service organizations, or regional education authorities. Making grants only to single districts was a weakness of TASAP. Some TASAP grantee districts were not in a good position to create diverse schools because they had few White or middle-class students and/or were focused in redesigning their assignment policies in ways that might attract more advantaged students back to the district even if that meant that within-district segregation would deepen.
- Stronger Together sets aside \$2.5 million for national activities like technical assistance, evaluation, and sharing knowledge among grantees. In our study of TASAP, people in the districts that won grants told us that they wished there had been more connections with other grantee districts and implementation support from USED. Currently, there is a resurgence of interest in diversity and integration, and the knowledge gained through Stronger Together would also be useful to leaders in districts that do not receive grants.

We also would like to see the Department strengthen Stronger Together in the following ways:

1 Our prior research on the TASAP program is summarized in a 2014 paper, "Good Intentions, Limited Impact: The Technical Assistance for Student Assignment Plans Program" (by McDermott, DeBray, Frankenberg, Fung-Morley, and Blankenship), available at https://works.bepress.com/kathryn_mcdermott/20/. We are university professors whose research focuses on increasing equity in public schools.

■ Racial and ethnic diversity is as important as socioeconomic diversity. The TASAP grantee districts were unsure about whether their proposals and projects could explicitly include racial diversity. Since the end of TASAP, the 2011 guidance from the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice,¹ plus this summer's Fisher decision on affirmative action, reinforce the message of the Parents Involved case that racial integration is an important and constitutionally permissible goal for states and school districts to pursue. The Stronger Together School Diversity Act of 2016 would clarify that the Department's Stronger Together budget proposal can and should be used to promote racial integration, in addition to socioeconomic integration.

■ Integration is a proven, research-based way to improve educational outcomes. The selection criteria for Stronger Together grants should therefore favor applications that clearly link diversity to educational quality. Without making this connection explicit, diversity and integration programs are politically vulnerable in the long term.

This investment from the federal government to support voluntary local integration efforts will enable districts to constructively address the racial transformation and rising inequality among our children and youth in ways that will strengthen communities and our nation's future.



Photo Credit: Office of Senator Chris Murphy

Senator Chris Murphy announcing the *Stronger Together School Diversity Act of 2016* (with Education Secretary John King)

The National Coalition on School Diversity is a network of national civil rights organizations, university-based research institutes, local educational advocacy groups, and academic researchers seeking a greater commitment to racial and economic diversity in federal K-12 education policy and funding. www.school-diversity.org
