

## **Building Support for Educators in Racially Changing Suburbs**

*NSCD Statement on School Boundary Changes in Eden Prairie, Minnesota*

At the start of the 2011-12 academic year, about 1,050 of Eden Prairie, Minnesota's some 9,600 students changed schools under a locally devised plan to make building usage more efficient, cut costs, reduce concentrated poverty and increase racial and cultural diversity. The plan triggered outcry from a highly organized group of parents, who attracted local, state and even national media attention to this suburb about 17 miles southwest of Minneapolis. The outraged parents threatened a lawsuit, a threat that was later dropped. In drawing new school attendance boundaries, educators and residents who crafted the plan had used the legal guidelines set forth in the US Supreme Court's 2007 decision, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District #1*, which defines the avoidance of segregation and the attainment of diversity as "compelling" government interests and provides permissible practices for achieving these goals.

Through this statement, the National Coalition on School Diversity (NCSA) expresses strong support for Eden Prairie educators and community members who, under immense pressure, implemented a forward-looking plan to achieve equity, efficiency and high-quality schooling within economically and culturally and racially diverse schools. The events in Eden Prairie lead us again to urge state and federal government officials to develop practices and policies that would support this and similar local efforts of local officials' in the nation's growing number of racially and ethnically changing suburbs.<sup>1</sup>

The most recent rigorous social science research (see "Resources" at the end of this document) adds to decades of studies demonstrating a wide range of academic and longer-term social benefits of attendance at racially and/or economically diverse schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Eden Prairie, like many of its neighboring suburbs in Minnesota and like a growing number of US suburban communities, has experienced demographic change in the last two decades. For example, in 2000, 90 percent of the city's public school students were white, 5 percent were Asian, 3 percent were African American, and 1 percent Hispanic. By 2010, 75 percent of students were white, 11 percent were African American (largely of Somali descent), 10 percent were Asian and 4 percent were Hispanic.

The changes to Eden Prairie's boundary and grade configurations came into being after educators in early 2009 grew increasingly concerned about the growing concentration of poverty in one elementary school, the lack of meaningful racial and cultural economic diversity in another and the fiscal and academic inefficiency of the city's K-4 model. A committee of parents and residents crafted a plan designed to resolve these and other challenges. The final plan altered school attendance zones, which, ironically, *reduced* the average bus travel time in this 6-square mile district. The plan also moved the district to a K-6 model, thereby reducing the number of transitions to new schools that students would have to make during their K-12 careers. Upon recommendation of then-Superintendent Melissa Krull, the city's school board in December, 2010, endorsed the plan on a 4 - 3 vote. Public meetings routinely devolved into booing and name calling. The plan, though, went ahead and this September, the several principals and many teachers affected by the changes report that Eden Prairie's pupils this fall transitioned smoothly to their new schools.

Shortly after the plan took effect this fall, the city school board, which had faced enormous pressure from a group of white parents, effectively forced Superintendent Krull out of her job. The ouster came despite the dramatic improvements in academic achievement posted during her tenure, despite a clear and relatively recent narrowing of the racial achievement gap and despite her strong support among administrators, school principals, teachers and parents.

As of late October, 2011, the integrative boundary changes remain intact but are precarious. The upcoming school board election, scheduled for November 8, 2011 could determine whether or not the plan survives, as some candidates have expressed opposition to it. (Four seats on the 7-member board are open).

NCSD applauds the efforts of the former superintendent, Dr. Melissa Krull, other administrators, educators, Eden Prairie residents and elected officials who made decisions based upon decades of experience working with children, budgets and facilities. Educators and community leaders advocated for these changes after careful consideration of legal issues and of the most recent and most rigorous research findings that demonstrate the educational benefits of diversity and the harms of concentrated poverty.

A careful look at the public process and implementation of this plan shows that Krull and others engaged in a systematic effort to inform and involve the public both during the plan development and after its approval by the elected school board. Further, a review of demographic data strongly suggests that poverty would have continued to intensify in one school that had drawn a sizable share of its enrollment from affordable housing and a growing Somali

immigrant community in the city's northern section. The opposition may have won ample media coverage, but interviews with Eden Prairie educators and parents, who expressed strong support for the plan to reduce concentrated poverty, suggest that the angered parents' group does not represent the community as a whole.

We are encouraged not only by the desegregation effort, but too, by the dedication of Eden Prairie's teachers and principals, who for several years have worked with national experts such as the National Urban Alliance and the Pacific Education Group, to harness the educational benefits of growing diversity. Teachers and school staff regularly attend trainings and implement their knowledge by crafting curriculum, using inclusive discipline policies, employing classroom engagement practices, designing parent involvement programs and practices and keeping up with professional development that promotes equity and cultural competence in many facets of schooling. Central office administrators have repeatedly stated that they view increased diversity and the reduction of concentrated poverty as elements in a broad effort to continue narrowing the racial/ethnic achievement gap. Since 2008, data show Eden Prairie's students posting steady gains in scores on state tests in reading and in math. The so-called "achievement gap" between white students and students of color has narrowed considerably in recent years, as has the gap between students from low-income families and other students.<sup>2</sup>

Eden Prairie exemplifies the challenges educators face in the nation's growing number of suburban communities undergoing racial, cultural, linguistic and economic changes.<sup>3</sup> These intensifying demographic shifts are happening all over the United States, and we need to support educators and leaders when they respond in constructive ways consistent with what research suggests. Such racial and cultural changes will often require equity-minded local educators to craft policies that upset the status quo in communities that only recently were far

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in 2008, in Eden Prairie, 44 percent of African American students passed the state's MCA/MTAS test in reading. By 2011, 65 percent of African American students had passed the test. During that period, Hispanic students' pass rate increased from 59 percent to 71 percent. White students increased their passage rate from 86 percent in 2008 to 91 percent in 2011. The gap between white and African American performance narrowed from 42 percentage points in 2008 to 26 percentage points in 2011. And the gap in reading passing rates between Hispanic students and white students narrowed from 27 percentage points in 2008 to 20 percentage points in 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Based on an analysis of the 2010 US Census, the demographer William Frey notes: "More than half of all minority groups in large metro areas, including blacks, now live in the suburbs. The share of blacks in large metro areas living in suburbs rose from 37 percent in 1990 to 44 percent in 2000 to 51 percent in 2010." In 2010, the share of whites in suburbs was 72 percent; Asians 62 percent and Latinos 59 percent. See: Frey, William H. *Melting Pot Cities and Suburbs: Racial and Ethnic Change in Metro America in the 2000s*. The Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution. May, 2011.

more homogenous. In the context of racial and cultural and economic differences, such change often incites intense opposition from privileged constituents who perceive that they benefit from keeping unequal arrangements intact. locally based organizing to build support for pro-diversity policies is always crucial in such a context. However, without complementary support from state and federal government, equity-minded policy remains unstable and the leaders who craft it remain too vulnerable to be effective over the long term. Thus, we recommend that state leaders across the nation act immediately to assess needs in demographically changing suburbs and develop policies accordingly to support local efforts to avoid concentrated poverty and segregation and create more equitable educational environments. A handful of states, including Minnesota, do have policies that identify racially isolated schools and provide incentives or directives for communities to create racial desegregation plans. However, even in places with such policies, the rapid changes in suburbs in particular should trigger a reexamination and, possibly, adjustments to such rules and regulations *before* segregation becomes entrenched and more difficult to remedy.

The particular case of Minnesota provides a good example of the need for policy monitoring and possible adjustment. The state's current "desegregation rule" identifies racially isolated schools and encourages local communities to develop plans to alleviate such conditions. Unfortunately, this rule is potentially undermined by another state policy that allows students to transfer out of their home districts with no regard as to whether or not such moves enhance or hinder desegregation efforts. Eden Prairie is a case in point. In the fall of September 2011, about 44 white children, who would have been assigned to a more racially diverse school under the plan, transferred from Eden Prairie to the nearly all-white neighboring district, Minnetonka. (Officials in Minnetonka regularly advertise its school district offerings in the privileged but more diverse and changing nearby suburbs, such as Eden Prairie.)<sup>4</sup> This policy context, which exists in other states as well, makes meaningful, stable integration desegregation even more difficult to achieve.

We hope that equity-minded elected leaders, local residents, and state officials across our nation will draw lessons from the recent events in Eden Prairie and act now to make stable, integrated, high quality public schools accessible to more children of all racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

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<sup>4</sup> The Eden Prairie Sun reports: "Minnetonka Schools aren't shy about recruiting students from other communities. Since 2002, they have had a strategic plan that includes promoting their programs and the district through local newspapers, advertisements and relocation guides. . . . For the last four years, they have run commercials on Minnesota Public Radio and Twin Cities Public Television."

[http://www.mnsun.com/articles/2011/01/26/eden\\_prairie/news/1ep27enrollment.txt](http://www.mnsun.com/articles/2011/01/26/eden_prairie/news/1ep27enrollment.txt)

**The following resources offer information about racially changing suburbs and about policies and practices that support school diversity and the reduction of concentrated poverty.**

- Integrating Suburban Schools: How to Benefit from Growing Diversity and Avoid Segregation

<http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/integrating-suburban-schools-how-to-benefit-from-growing-diversity-and-avoid-segregation/tefera-suburban-manual-2011.pdf>

- Melting Pot Cities and Suburbs: Racial and Ethnic Change in Metro America in the 2000s. The Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution.

[http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2011/0504\\_census\\_ethnicity\\_frey/0504\\_census\\_ethnicity\\_frey.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2011/0504_census_ethnicity_frey/0504_census_ethnicity_frey.pdf)

- NCSD Research Briefs Summarizing the Benefits of Racially and Economically Diverse Schooling

*Diversity & Math and Science Achievement*

<http://charleshamiltonhouston.org/assets/documents/publications/DiversityResearchBriefNo1.pdf>

*Diversity & Literacy, Behavioral Climate, High School Graduation Rates*

<http://charleshamiltonhouston.org/assets/documents/publications/DiversityResearchBriefNo2.pdf>

*Diverse Schools in a Democratic Society*

<http://charleshamiltonhouston.org/assets/documents/publications/DiversityResearchBriefNo3.pdf>

- Reaffirming the Role of School Integration in K-12 Education Policy

<http://www.school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityIssueBriefStmt.pdf>