A large body of research evidence supports the demands of a growing number of parents, university officials, and employers who want elementary and secondary schools to better prepare students for an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse society and global economy. Research demonstrates that there are important educational benefits—cognitive, social, and emotional—for students who interact with classmates from different backgrounds, cultures, and orientations to the world. The educational benefits of more racially and ethnically diverse schools to better educate all our students for the 21st century is well documented. Given that our public educational system is becoming increasingly diverse in student population and increasingly segregated and unequal, policy makers would be well advised to consider a vast body of education research that point to the educational strengths of racially diverse public schools.1

Demographic destiny and the growing demand for racially and ethnically diverse schools

- For the first time in our nation’s history, White students no longer constitute a majority of K–12 public school enrollment; in fact, less than half of the total U.S. population will be White non-Hispanic by 2042.2

- Opinion poll data reveal that millennials (ages 18–34) are more accepting of interracial marriage and multiracial neighborhoods and schools.3

- In the last 30 years both city neighborhoods and suburbs have grown increasingly racially diverse, as more young White adults have moved into the cities their grandparents fled decades ago and families of color have moved to inner-ring suburbs and beyond. 4, 5, 6

- This “great inversion” of urban and suburban populations creates an opportunity for fostering racially and ethnically diverse school environments that adequately prepare children for the 21st century. 7, 8

The lack of K–12 educational policy focus on racial and ethnic diversity

- Over the last several decades, the focus of policy makers, educators and researchers has shifted away from the potential benefits of racially diverse schools and classrooms9 and toward a focus on outcomes and accountability in racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically segregated settings.

- In fact, the emphasis in K–12 education on narrow student achievement measures moved the entire field away from examining cultural issues related to race, ethnicity, and the social and emotional development of children.10

- This movement away from diversity issues in K–12 education contrasts sharply with the movement toward documenting and implementing policies that promote the educational benefits of diversity in higher education. High-profile court cases on affirmative action in higher education and the higher education research on the educational benefits of diversity have strengthened colleges and universities’ commitment to racially diverse student bodies and educational settings in which students learn from each other across cultural boundaries.
In the K–12 arena, the jurisprudence and the research alliances around school desegregation policy have focused less on the educational benefits of diverse classrooms. This is unfortunate, given the evidence suggesting that students can learn from classmates with different backgrounds and perspectives. These benefits are real and substantial, but the recent policy focus on student outcomes—measured almost exclusively by standardized tests considered as the central measure of equal educational opportunity—has led to less emphasis on the educational experiences of students in racially diverse schools and classroom.

This policy context, coupled with the fact that K–12 schools exist amid severe residential segregation, highly fragmented school districts, and the limitations on interdistrict desegregation remedies after the 1974 Supreme Court decision in *Milliken v. Bradley*, results in a public education system that is simultaneously becoming increasingly diverse in its student population and increasingly segregated and unequal.12

**Higher education and K–12 research on the educational benefits of diversity**

*Enhanced learning outcomes for students in diverse educational contexts:*

- The higher education research clearly demonstrates that exposure to diversity enhances critical thinking and problem-solving ability, while also improving several other attributes related to academic success, including student satisfaction and motivation, general knowledge, and intellectual self-confidence.13, 14 In addition, there is evidence that when college students experience positive interactions with students from different racial backgrounds, the result is *more open minds* and *more engagement in classroom conversations.*15

- The bulk of the K–12 education research on the impact of school racial and socioeconomic composition on measurable academic outcomes documents that attending racially segregated, high-poverty schools has a strong negative association with students’ academic achievement (often measured through grade-level reading and math test scores).16 Furthermore, the research reveals that attending racially diverse schools is beneficial to all students and is associated with smaller test score gaps between students of different racial backgrounds.17

- The benefits of attending a racially diverse school are particularly strong for “nonminority” White students because such experiences can address their *implicit biases* toward members of minority racial groups, biases that interfere with the educational process. Indeed, implicit biases can also *disrupt cognitive functioning* for members of both the majority and the minority, as students exert significant mental effort “in order to combat the expression of stereotypes and negative attitudes that are often activated automatically and unintentionally.”18

*Increased intercultural and cross-racial knowledge, understanding, and empathy:*

- Other research examines how racially diverse educational settings can reduce prejudice by promoting greater contact between students of different races—both informally and in classroom settings—and by encouraging relationships and friendships across group lines.19

- In addition, there exists a similarly impressive body of research supporting the correlation between campus and classroom diversity and an enhanced ability of students to learn interracial understanding, empathy, and an ability to live with and learn from people of diverse backgrounds.
• Research on “intergroup contact” shows that while racial segregation and isolation can perpetuate racial fear, prejudice, and stereotypes, intergroup contact and critical cross-racial dialogue can help to ameliorate these problems.20

**Better preparation for employment in the global economy:**

• University officials and business leaders argue that diverse college campuses and classrooms prepare students for life, work, and leadership in a more global economy by fostering leaders who are creative, collaborative, and able to navigate deftly in dynamic, multicultural environments.21, 22

• Social development and leadership skills are also important in the K–12 system as well. A growing body of research suggests that the benefits of K–12 school diversity, in which students learn cooperatively alongside of those whose perspectives and backgrounds are different from their own, apply to all students, including middle-class White students, because they promote creativity, motivation, deeper learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.23 The skills that students gain from diverse learning environments are in line with what policy makers say should be among the primary focuses of K–12 education.24 They are also skills that are highly desired by employers.25

**Increased “democratic outcomes,” including engagement in political issues and participation in democratic processes:**

• Students’ experiences in diverse classrooms can provide the kind of cross-cultural dialogue that prepares them for citizenship in a multifaceted society.26 Students develop improved civic attitudes toward democratic participation, civic behaviors such as participating in community activities, and intentions to participate in civic activities resulting from diverse learning experiences. Researchers have even documented the effects of diversity on civic engagement and concluded that college diversity experiences are, in fact, positively related to increased civic engagement.27

• More recently, attention has turned to the role that diverse schools play in preparing students to live in a multicultural society, particularly in terms of promoting interracial understanding and comfort, friendship building, and civic and democratic engagement.28

• Findings on the benefits of learning in diverse environments derive not solely from research on higher education or K–12 education. Drawing on decades of research from organizational scientists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, and demographers, an article in *Scientific American* argues that diversity even enhances creativity and actually encourages the search for novel information and perspectives, leading to better decision making and problem solving. Therefore, diversity can improve the bottom line of companies and lead to unfettered discoveries and breakthrough innovations. “Even simply being exposed to diversity can change the way you think.”29

How public schools can help foster the educational benefits of diversity: Policy recommendations for the 21st century

• *Student assignment and enrollment policies.* Federal and state policies should provide incentives to districts and schools that foster and stabilize racial and socioeconomically diverse public schools through redrawing attendance boundaries to encompass sections of two racially or ethnically distinct neighborhoods. Similarly, school choice and voluntary transfer plans could
be created or amended to keep diverse racial or ethnic school enrollments as a goal. After the 2007 Supreme Court ruling in the Louisville and Seattle cases, there are still race-conscious measures that school districts can use to accomplish this goal, including selective recruitment of students and strategic siting of schools.

- **Redefining “good” schools for the 21st century.** Federal and state policies should include indicators of diversity and measures of intergroup relations and intercultural understanding in measuring and judging “good” schools. On every district and school report card, there should be a measure of the success of all districts and public schools in preparing students for higher education and the workforce through diverse schools and classrooms that incorporate the educational benefits of diversity. No racially segregated school—be it all-black, all-Hispanic, all-Asian, or all-White—should be considered “excellent” in our current context.

- **Teacher education programs.** Future teachers should be taught how to diversify by allowing students of different backgrounds to learn from each other in the context of equal status, common goals, and mutual respect. There are a few schools of education in which this is becoming a more central theme in teacher education programs, but this work needs to become more widespread.

- **Policy changes from the bottom up.** Parents and local leaders should engage in efforts to support and stabilize racially and ethnically diverse public schools in both gentrifying urban communities and diversifying suburban communities. Leaders should work with educators in these schools to promote the implementation of student assignment policies and curriculum and teaching strategies that help all students come to more intercultural understanding. These movements are taking place in several local contexts, including Louisville and Wake County, but such efforts are exhausting absent more support from higher levels of government.

References


The Educational Benefits of Diverse Schools and Classrooms for All Students
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