Research Brief

The Impact of Racially Diverse Schools in a Democratic Society

By Susan Eaton and Gina Chirichigno

Charles Hamilton Houston **INSTITUTE FOR RACE & JUSTICE** HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

This is the third in a series of three briefs summarizing findings from the newest and most rigorous research related to racial and socioeconomic diversity in public schools. The studies on which this brief is based were published recently in three special issues of the peer-reviewed journal, *Teachers College Record*, edited by Professors Roslyn Arlin Mickelson of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and Kathryn Borman of the University of South Florida.

For more than two decades, the success of school desegregation has been judged mainly by the degree to which it benefits individuals, either through academic achievement or social mobility.

Why This Research is Important

This research augments an already extensive body of work in this area, which has reached similar conclusions. However, the work published this year in *TCR* is particularly rigorous. It draws from several strong data bases and employs cutting-edge statistical methods. This comprehensive collection of studies pays meticulous attention to separating the discrete contributions that schools, teachers, families and students themselves make to a variety of important educational outcomes, such as test scores and graduation rates. We urge courts, policymakers, education rights lawyers, educators and others to use this new work as a guide in decisions and advocacy related to diversity, schooling and equal opportunity.

It goes without saying that these are important measures. However, civil rights leaders and educators have always pursued desegregation and diversity in large part because of its potential benefits to society at large. Their hope was, and still is, that diverse schooling experiences would contribute to development of a more cohesive, more equal society and build a stronger foundation for democracy. Similarly, desegregation's advocates hoped diversity would reduce racial and cultural prejudice by bringing young people from different racial or cultural backgrounds together.

Generally, the research examined here confirms findings from earlier studies finding that racial diversity in schools does carry long-term social benefits. These include reduced neighborhood, college and workplace segregation, higher levels of social cohesion and a reduced likelihood for racial prejudice. It appears, too, that the particular nature of a school environment – for example, whether the school is a model of inclusion and equal participation – helps determine whether or not its graduates develop the skills to navigate and find comfort in racially diverse settings later in life.

What is the Relationship Between Racial Composition of Schools or Childhood Neighborhoods and Adult Attitudes About Other Racial & Ethnic Groups?

Jomills Braddock and his colleague, Amaryllis Del Carmen Gonzalez of the University of Miami, consider the effects of neighborhood and school-level segregation levels on people's preferences for

same-race neighbors and their preferences for their children to have same-race schoolmates.[1]

- Early racial isolation, especially in schools, Braddock and Gonzalez find, is significantly associated with a later expressed desire to live around people of the same race.

- For each race or ethnic group, early school racial isolation, even when controlling for early neighborhood isolation, is strongly associated with young adult preference for same-race neighbors.

- Previous racial isolation in school is a stronger predictor than previous neighborhood racial isolation of young adults' preferences for having neighbors of the same race.

- For African Americans and Asians the level of racial isolation in their childhood neighborhoods still had a statistically significant association with preference for same-race neighbors. This held even after taking school-level racial isolation into account. This was not true for whites and Latinos, whose previous school-level racial isolation far overshadowed the effects of their previous neighborhood-level racial isolation.

- The relationship between previous racial isolation in school and preference for same-race neighbors is strongest for African Americans, followed by whites. Generally, for each race and ethnic group, early neighborhood racial isolation is strongly associated with young adult preference for their children to have same-race schoolmates.

- Generally, for each race and ethnic group, early school racial isolation, even after controlling for early neighborhood racial isolation, has an independent association with a preference that one's children have same-race classmates.

- Thus, Braddock and Gonzalez conclude that while racial isolation in neighborhoods and schools are both important predictors of later racial attitudes, racially segregated schools play a more significant role in "inhibiting the potential development of social cohesion among young adults."

- This study, its authors conclude, challenges the discourse in which "the merits of school desegregation (are) almost exclusively. . .debated in terms of its impact on individuals…" ignoring "important consequences for society."

The Relationship Between Racial Composition of a High School and College Admission

A study by Robert Teranishi of New York University and Tara L. Parker of the University of Massachusetts at Boston examines the relationship between racial segregation of high schools and the likelihood that a student will be enrolled at a University of California campus, which is the most selective sector of public higher education in the state.[2]

- This study finds a negative association of attending a racially segregated minority school and the likelihood that a student will enroll at a UC campus.

- Specifically, a much smaller proportion of the state's Latino and African American high school graduates in the study attend predominantly white schools (23.9 percent) but the share of students from such schools who are in the UC system is disproportionately high, at 40.3 percent.

- Regardless of their racial group, students who had attended a white-majority school are more likely than students in high-minority schools to be enrolled as first-time freshmen at one of the UC campuses.

- At 5 of 8 campuses in this study, a greater proportion of underrepresented minority students (African American and Latino) originate from predominantly white schools than from predominantly African American or Latino schools.

- The share of first-time freshman who come from predominantly African American or Latino schools is disproportionately low (about 22 percent) at UC campuses. The proportion of such students overall in the state is nearly twice that share, or 43 percent.

- The study finds, for example, that 75 percent of UC Berkeley's students originate from majority white schools, compared with 17 percent who come from schools that enroll predominantly African American and/or Latino students.

- Overall, in the UC system, about two thirds of first-time freshman originate from heavily white high schools even though those schools comprise less than half (about 45 percent) of all graduates of public high schools in the state.

The Power of Racially Diverse Schools to Diversify Neighborhoods & Workplaces

A study by Pat Rubio Goldsmith of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee examines the extent to which the racial composition of a person's neighborhood remains the same over generations and whether the

racial composition of a teenager's high school or college has any bearing upon that relationship.[3] In other words, Goldsmith asks: Does school desegregation promote residential integration by counteracting a well-documented tendency for people to choose neighborhoods that have racial compositions similar to their childhood neighborhoods?

The data shows that the racial composition of one's teen neighborhood explains about three-fourths of the variance in racial composition of an adult neighborhood. However, increasing school diversity, the data shows, "mediates" this relationship so that the tendency to "perpetuate" segregation becomes far weaker.

- The data in Goldsmith's study shows that if high schools had an even distribution of white students, the effect of the racial composition of one's previous neighborhood would grow weaker, with its power reduced by 31 percent.

- The percentage of white students in one's high school has a stronger predictive effect upon the racial composition of one's neighborhood than even the effect of one's race. In other words, being African American or Latino was less influential in choosing a predominantly African American neighborhood than was attendance at a segregated, predominantly African American school with a small share of white students.

- Goldsmith concludes that these findings are consistent with "perpetuation theorists" who "argue that experiences in racial contexts shape young people's. . . dispositions, and social contexts in ways that direct them toward institutions with racial contexts like those they experienced in youth. Therefore, programs that increase interaction contact in youth, like

school desegregation. . .may lead in the long run to more integrated neighborhoods over time. . .”

○ Similarly, research by Jomills Braddock, discussed previously, suggests that, generally, people who had attended racially isolated schools as children were significantly less likely to express a desire for neighbors of a different race and significantly less likely to express a desire for different-race classmates for their children.[4]

A study by Elizabeth Stearns of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte shows strong associations between school segregation levels and later levels of racial isolation in workplaces.[5] Particularly significant is that these associations held over the long term, in both 1994 and six years later, in 2000. Stearns study is important in that it confirms earlier findings showing a strong positive relationship between school diversity and later diversity in the workplace. However, these studies, Stearns notes, needed updating since they were conducted on samples of students who had attended school in the 1970s.

○ Stearns’ data shows that African Americans and whites exposed to larger concentrations of other racial groups in high school are less likely to work in racially isolated workplaces. However, this relationship does not hold for Asians and Latinos.

○ That said, for Asians and Latinos, the racial composition of their neighborhoods is indeed strongly associated with the level of racial isolation that they experience in their later workplaces.

○ Stearns finds these associations for African Americans and whites even after controlling for a variety of other plausible variables including

high school resources and levels of residential isolation in the subjects’ neighborhoods.

○ Stearns finds that whites have, “far and away” the highest level of racial isolation in the workplace, followed by African Americans, Latinos and Asians. Whites’ level of racial isolation, Stearns finds, is about 30 percentage points higher than that experienced by African Americans.

The Development of White and African American Students’ Abilities to Navigate Racially Diverse Settings and Social Environments

In her *Teachers College Record* article, Prudence Carter of Stanford University studies four different types of multiracial schools to explore the development of “culturally flexible” students who can effectively navigate diverse social environs such as workplaces and neighborhoods.[6] Carter’s work helps us understand how desegregated schools might move past mere desegregation toward truly integrated educational settings where all members are full, equal participants with equal status. Her mixed-methods study combines quantitative surveys with ethnography and suggests which school practices might engender or impede students’ abilities to move past social and symbolic racial boundaries to achieve “cultural flexibility.” Carter acknowledges that the “relative academic gains of desegregated schools appear greater than segregated schools—namely, minority-dominant ones.” She suggests that “further investigation into the positive social and cultural functions of the latter would provide more direction for the former.”

More specifically, Carter finds:
○ In both majority-white multiracial schools, African American and white students appear to have more physical and academic distance between each other than their counterparts in the two so-termed “majority-minority”[7] schools in which African American students or

a combination of African American and Latino students are in the majority.

- The results from this study confirm that African American students attending high-performing majority-minority schools in two urban areas both in the Northeast and South possess significantly higher self-esteem than their counterparts in nearby majority-white schools within these same regions.

- Generally, Carter finds white students in the Northeast more culturally flexible than those from the South.

- Self-esteem is a significant and positive predictor of cultural flexibility for African American students. African American students enrolled in "majority-minority" schools in the study reveal higher self-esteem than their racial counterparts in the two majority-white schools. Meta-analyses of hundreds of studies reveal that African Americans consistently report higher self-esteem than whites, which is attributable to cultural differences and protection against stigma. In other words, African American students of similar socioeconomic backgrounds and living in the same metropolitan areas show strikingly different levels of self-esteem depending on which school they attend.

- Among all students, placement in either AP or honors courses is positively related to cultural flexibility. This result, Carter suggests, signals something about the academic experiences in such classes. Scholars and researchers inform us about the differential levels of curricular content and exposure, creativity, analytical rigor, pedagogical techniques, and support of student curiosity in academically rigorous courses versus those in "regular" or standard classes.

- Exposure to AP and honors classes—both proxies for a certain type of classroom

experience—are positively associated with cultural flexibility. However, the disproportionate representation of African American students in these classes at majority-white schools foments social and cultural distance. (It is important to note that at the so-termed "majority-minority" schools, African Americans were well represented in AP and honors classes).

- The experience of being a "minority" differs between majority-minority and majority-white schools for both African American and white students. African American students have less access to particular resources and status groups in majority-white schools and more access in majority-minority schools. In majority-white schools, certain academic or extracurricular practices may become "racialized" – deemed "white" or appear outside the cultural repertoires of African American students.

- In comparison, when white students are in the minority, they benefit from their racial privilege and status or "capital" within schools, with policies and administrators appearing to spend disproportionate energy catering to them and their parents in an effort to prevent "white flight."

What Else Do We Know About the Impact of Racial Diversity?

This new research augments an already sizable literature on questions about the longer-term social impact of diversity and/or segregation in schools. Based on findings over two decades, the National Academy of Education concluded in 2007 that "there are long-term benefits of desegregation in elementary and secondary schools. Under some circumstances, and over the long term, experience in desegregated schools increases the likelihood of greater tolerance and better intergroup relations among adults of different racial groups."[8]

Recommendations

- Policymakers, educators and others aspiring to increase social cohesion and reduce neighborhood segregation should create more opportunities for students to attend racially diverse schools or have sustained, practiced interaction with students of other racial and ethnic groups.

- Policymakers, educators and others wishing to increase diversity on college campuses or workplaces should not only advance recruitment programs that reach out to people of color, but should actively advocate for greater diversity in K-12 education.

- Studies suggest that racial minority students who attend segregated, predominantly African American or Latino schools may be penalized in the college admission process because of the racial composition of their schools. College officials should not only reach out and cultivate future African American and Latino students from all types of schools, but if they are committed to greater diversity on their campuses, they should actively advocate for programs and policies that increase diversity at the K-12 level.

- To foster development of "cultural flexibility" in which students can cross perceived racial boundaries to pursue opportunity and fully participate in the life of an institution and society, educators in diverse, majority-white schools should look to some of the positive features found in diverse schools in which African American and/or Latino students are in the majority.

- Specifically, educators in diverse, majority-white schools should actively guard against the tendency to prevent "white flight" by favoring or appearing to favor white students and their parents. This might include curricular advantages through AP or honors classes or catering to the demands of white parents so as to avoid "white flight."

- Educators in diverse "majority-white" schools should make efforts to ensure that African American and Latino students are well represented in honors and AP classes, as overrepresentation of white students in such classes tends to foment social distance and impede "cultural flexibility."

- Educators in diverse "majority-white" schools should provide ample opportunity and active encouragement for students of all races to deconstruct and cross perceived "racial" boundaries within the schools. This might include curricular choices, extracurricular activities and leadership roles.

- Government-enforced school boundary lines often make racial diversity – a precursor to more social cohesion and improved race relations – nearly impossible to achieve. This is because in many regions, government-enforced school district boundaries follow neighborhood and municipal boundaries that establish racially segregated housing patterns. Educators and people concerned about youth in such environments should provide opportunities for students to interact in other types of multiracial settings. This might include summer or other vacation periods or out-of-school projects that bring together students from several demographically distinct communities.

Susan Eaton is research director at the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School. **Gina Chirichigno,** formerly a researcher and project coordinator at the Houston Institute, is a post-doctoral researcher at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University. The authors would like to acknowledge Kelly Garvin at the Houston Institute for her assistance with this brief.

Endnotes

1   Jomills Henry Braddock II & Amaryllis Del Carmen Gonzalez, *Social Isolation and Social Cohesion: The Effects of K–12 Neighborhood and School Segregation on Intergroup Orientations*, 112 Teachers Coll. Rec. 1631 (2010). One limitation of this study is that it examined the attitudes only of college students. (The database used here is the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen. It is a comprehensive survey of about 4,000 first-year students entering colleges in 1999.)

2   Robert Teranishi & Tara L. Parker, *Social Reproduction of Inequality: The Racial Composition of Feeder Schools to the University of California*, 112 Teachers Coll. Rec. 1575 (2010).

3   Pat Rubio Goldsmith, *Learning Apart, Living Apart: How the Racial and Ethnic Segregation of Schools and Colleges Perpetuates Residential Segregation*, 112 Teachers Coll. Rec. 1602 (2010).

4   The Braddock and Gonzalez study is included in this section because it examines expressed "desires" rather than tangible action.

5   Elizabeth Stearns, *Long-Term Correlates of High School Racial Composition: Perpetuation Theory Reexamined*, 112 Teachers Coll. Rec. 1654 (2010).

6   Prudence L. Carter, *Race and Cultural Flexibility among Students in Different Multiracial Schools*, 112 Teachers Coll. Rec. 1529 (2010). Carter studies a majority-white multiracial school in the North and one in the South. She also studies a "majority-minority" multiracial school in the North and one in the South. One of the majority-minority schools is nearly equal in its African American and Latino composition.

7   In this study, "minority-majority" refers to multiracial schools where either African American students or a combination of African American and Latino students are in the majority.

8   National Academy of Education. Race Conscious Policies for Assigning Students to Schools. Social Science Research and Supreme Court Cases. (2007).