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What we know about school integration, college attendance, and the reduction of poverty

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PRRAC
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The goals of promoting integration and avoiding racial isolation in K-12 education were recently reaffirmed as compelling government interests by five Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District #1* (2007). That decision did strike down specific elements of voluntary plans in Seattle and Louisville; however, a majority of the Court indicated support for a wide range of race-conscious measures to promote school integration that do not assign individual students based on their race.

The importance of avoiding racial and economic segregation in schools is important not just for its own sake, but because of the documented benefits to students that flow from more racially integrated[1], lower poverty schools[2]. The social science evidence on the benefits of integration continues to grow – especially in the more comprehensive recent research (1990s to the present) that include data from nationally representative samples or state-wide populations, valid and reliable measures of key concepts, advanced statistical modeling used to analyze the data, and often, studies employing longitudinal data[3].

These studies over the past twenty years have demonstrated that integrated education leads not only to achievement gains in math and reading for African American and Latino children[4], but also to increased occupational attainment[5], less involvement with the criminal justice system[6], and a greater tendency for graduates of integrated schools later in life to live in integrated neighborhoods, have friends from many races and ethnic groups, and to be employed in diverse workplaces[7].

What does this research tell us specifically about the effects of K-12 school integration on college attendance rates, college graduation, and intergenerational perpetuation of poverty? We recognize that additional research is still needed on these specific questions, but here are some things that we know:

Attending integrated K-12 schools increases the **likelihood of attending college**[8], particularly for youth from underrepresented minority communities. Integrated education works to foster college attendance in several clear ways. The educational expectations and performance of students who attend integrated schools surpasses those of students from segregated settings[9]. Students who attend integrated schools perform better on tests in math, science, language, social studies; they take higher-level math and science courses, and they hold higher educational aspirations than their otherwise comparable peers who attend racially isolated minority schools[10]. Racially integrated schools have lower levels of violence and social disorder than segregated settings[11]. They are more likely to have stable staffs composed of highly qualified teachers[12]—the single most important resource for academic achievement, and to have better school climates[13] (academically oriented peers, lower drop out rates, more parents with higher expectations) than racially isolated schools[14].

Attending desegregated K-12 schools increases the **likelihood of graduating from college** for many of the same reasons that integrated education better prepares students for entering college. Minority youth who attend integrated K-12 schools are less likely to be involved in the criminal justice system

either as perpetrators or victims[15], and they are more likely to develop rational plans of action toward educational and occupational attainment than their otherwise comparable peers K-12 educated in segregated schools[16]. These predispositions, combined with their better academic skills and higher educational aspirations associated with integrated K-12 experiences, launch youth onto an academic trajectory that leads to college graduation.

Intergenerational poverty has many dynamic sources, many of them structural and beyond the reach of any single individual's capacity to alter [e.g., economic cycles, jobs/transportation mismatch, deindustrialization, globalization, racial and gender discrimination in hiring, wages, and promotions]. At the same time, there are a number of indirect contributions to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty that integrated education can make in the lives of individual people. As noted above, integrated K-12 schooling is strongly linked to college attendance and college completion. College completion is strongly linked to employment in white collar and professional jobs that offer high wages and benefits, both of which contribute to individuals born into poverty rising above it[17].

When an individual acquires educational credentials he or she is more likely to be part of several social networks that can assist in finding employment in permanent, full-time career-oriented jobs that pay high wages and benefits. Minorities and Whites with experience in desegregated schools are more likely to choose to live in integrated neighborhoods and to make cross ethnic friendships as adults[18]. Experience with integrated K-12 and college schooling prepares individuals for complex social situations and multiethnic workplaces where the capacities to engage effectively, problem solve, plan, and collaborate with people different from oneself are at a premium[19]. Going to school with a diverse student body is associated with growth in leadership, critical thinking, and ability to work cooperatively, problem-solving and interpersonal skills[20]. These combined sets of cognitive and affective skills that enable people to thrive in multiethnic workplaces – nationally and globally – are developed by attending integrated K-12 schools. These factors increase the individual's likelihood of successful employment in a permanent, full-time white collar and professional jobs, the latter being the direct link to higher earning, benefits, and promotions.

Thus, the links between attending diverse K-12 schools and breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty are indirect, but clear: better academic skills, enhanced educational and occupational aspirations, greater likelihood of college completion, integrated social networks and neighborhoods, better jobs, and higher earnings are conditions that can break the intergenerational cycle of poverty for individuals who experience them.

With the combination of a renewed legal mandate and strong social science evidence, one would expect school integration to be high on the program agenda at the U.S. Department of Education. However, under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), vast sums of money (upwards of $70 billion) are continuing to reinforce patterns of racial and economic separation in America's schools. Even the two competitive ARRA funds that support education innovation – the Race to the Top Fund ($4.35 billion) and the Investing in Innovation Fund ($650 million) – include no incentives or requirements to reduce racial and economic concentration in K-12 education. The upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is also a major opportunity for the federal government to promote diversity, and a number of national civil rights groups have urged the Administration to include these goals in the reauthorization proposal (see www.prrac.org/projects/schooldiversity.php).

The Department's stated goal is to make high poverty schools as good as they can be – which is an important and laudable goal, but when the weight of the evidence suggests that poverty deconcentration and racial desegregation will have much stronger and longer lasting effects on low income children, we wonder why the Department is not spending more of its money on bringing children together?

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Endnotes

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