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DESPITE A FEDERAL RETREAT FROM SUPPORTING SCHOOL DIVERSITY, SOME STATES AND DISTRICTS FORGE AHEAD WITH SCHOOL DESIGNS FOR INTEGRATION

Two New Reports Explores Why Diversifying Schools Matters and the Role Districts, States, and the Federal Government Play in Reducing Racial Isolation

[*The Federal Role and School Integration: Brown's Promise and Present Challenges*](#)

[*Sharing the Wealth: How Regional Finance and Desegregation Plans Can Enhance Educational Equity*](#)

Public schools are increasingly segregated along both racial and socioeconomic lines, with 8.4 million Black and Latino/a children currently attending schools that are extremely segregated and high-poverty. Many of the most extremely segregated schools are also the most under-resourced, plagued by inexperienced educators, lack of access to quality curriculum, and lack of quality facilities or access to technology.

Two new reports from the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) look at the roles the federal government, states, and districts play in promoting racially diverse learning environments. *The Federal Role and School Integration: Brown's Promise and Present Challenges* by LPI Senior Policy Advisor [Janel George](#) and LPI president [Linda Darling-Hammond](#) highlights the research on the benefits of integrated learning environments, the critical role of the federal government in supporting school diversity, and evidence-based best practices districts and regions can implement to foster school diversity. It shows that, although integrated education is not a panacea, diverse learning environments benefit all students.

Sharing the Wealth: How Regional Finance and Desegregation Plans Can Enhance Educational Equity, by John Brittain, Acting Dean and Professor of Law at the University of the District of Columbia, and LPI researchers [Larkin Willis](#), and [Peter W. Cookson, Jr.](#), finds that most racial and ethnic segregation—and most financial inequities—in American public schools occur between, not within, school districts. This significant finding underscores the importance of

developing policy that supports equitable school finance and school diversity on a regional, rather than just a district, level.

“The Supreme Court rejected the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ in 1954 for good reason,” says Darling-Hammond. “Students in these racially isolated schools tend to have under-prepared teachers, fewer resources, and lower academic achievement. While significant progress was made in the 1960s and ‘70s, since the 1980s, when the federal government reduced its role in fostering integration, schools have become increasingly segregated and increasingly unequal.”

“Integrated education is not an end in and of itself, but a way to expand access to equal educational opportunities,” explains George. “A large body of social science research going back decades demonstrates the benefits of integrated learning environments, which include helping children to develop cross-cultural understanding, lessen bias and prejudice, and promote civic participation. In the absence of federal guidance and support for school diversity, many districts are left without the tools and resources needed to promote integrated learning environments.”

“Because segregation is more prevalent across districts than within districts, the most effective approaches for school diversity and equity cross district boundaries,” says Brittain. “Roadblocks will be inevitable, so for these efforts to succeed, policymakers must make an authentic commitment to implementing interdistrict desegregation plans. They must be persistent and practice ongoing problem solving.”

The reports were released at a [policy forum](#) today in Washington, D.C. See below for more information on each report. Scroll down for details on each report.

Key Facts

- The typical Black student is now in a school where almost two out of every three classmates (64%) are low-income, nearly double the level in schools of the typical White or Asian student (37% and 39%, respectively).
- A large proportion of White students attended overwhelmingly racially isolated schools, with more than a third attending schools that are 90 to 100% White.
- During the 25 years since the high point of integration in 1988, the share of intensely segregated non-White schools (defined as those schools with only 0–10% White students) more than tripled, increasing from 6% to 19% of all public schools.
- Hyper-segregated schools attended by Black and Latino students are plagued by resource inequities that undermine educational outcomes.
- One study of the effects of court-ordered desegregation on students born between 1945 and 1970 found that Black students’ graduation rates climbed by 2 percentage points for every year they attended an integrated school, and exposure to court-ordered desegregation for 5 years was associated with a 15% increase in wages and an 11 percentage point decline in annual poverty rates, with no negative impact on White student outcomes.

- Integrated schools promote tolerance; help develop cross-cultural understanding; lessen bias and prejudice; increasing the likelihood of students living in integrated neighborhoods as adults and holding jobs in integrated workplaces later in life; improve academic achievement and critical thinking skills; improve educational attainment; and promote civic participation in a diverse global economy.
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The Federal Role and School Integration: Brown’s Promise and Present Challenges

By Janel George, LPI Senior Policy Advisor, and Linda Darling-Hammond, LPI President

The report provides an overview of the federal role in supporting school diversity; describes the social science research on the benefits of diverse learning environments; and describes evidence-based strategies districts are implementing to promote diversity. Following the 2007 Supreme Court ruling in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, the Departments of Justice and Education under the Obama administration issued voluntary guidance in 2011 to address confusion about the ruling and to provide districts with resources and clarity on how to foster school diversity. That guidance was rescinded in July, 2018, by the Trump Administration. Despite the rescission of the guidance, some districts are still committed to advancing efforts to promote school diversity.

The report highlights several of these districts, including:

- Louisville–Jefferson County, KY, where integration efforts evolved from a court-ordered busing program into a choice program, in which the district weighs factors such as students’ socioeconomic status and educational level in determining school assignment. Parents can also choose special programs such as magnet programs or language immersion programs.
- The San Antonio Independent School District in Texas, which has implemented a “controlled choice” program that provides a wide range of education options, such as Montessori, college preparatory, and Expeditionary Learning schools, combining parental preference with data to ensure school diversity is achieved.
- Hartford, CT, where desegregation litigation in the 1990s led to a voluntary interdistrict “Open Choice” program featuring magnet schools that designed desegregated educational opportunities and supported transfers with both state and local funds. A 2013 analysis of the program found that students participating in the magnet and open choice programs were outperforming Hartford students attending other public schools.

Other district approaches discussed in the report include:

- **School and program siting decisions** that locate schools, such as magnet schools and special programs, in ways that help achieve diversity or avoid racial isolation.

- **School zoning decisions** that assign students to schools in ways that promote diversity, rather than assigning students based solely on their geographic proximity to schools.
- **Choice and open enrollment decisions** that allow parents to choose (or rank by preference) schools within or across school districts. The district then assigns students based in part on parental choice in ways that help achieve diversity or avoid racial or economic isolation.
- **Admission to competitive schools and programs** that may give special consideration in admissions to students from neighborhoods selected specifically because of their racial composition and other factors.
- **Inter- and intra-district transfers** that allow students to transfer among schools in ways that promote racial diversity and reduce racial isolation.

Sharing the Wealth: How Regional Finance and Desegregation Plans Can Enhance Educational Equity

By John Brittain, University of the District of Columbia, Acting Dean and Professor of Law; LPI Policy and Research Associate Larkin Willis; LPI Senior Researcher Peter W. Cookson Jr.

In American public schools, most racial and ethnic segregation—and most financial inequity—occurs between, not within, school districts. This report finds that cooperative interdistrict approaches are often the most effective ways to address these problems. Looking at three examples from Boston, MA; Hartford, CT; and Omaha, NE, the authors examine interdistrict desegregation designs that use innovative funding strategies to foster equity, quality, and access. The report describes programs' academic and social outcomes and identifies four lessons for policymakers:

- **Secure a metropolitan-wide agreement:** Because most racial and ethnic segregation in American public schools occurs between, not within, school districts, successful desegregation plans require collaboration between urban and suburban districts in a comprehensive regional plan.
- **Establish a clear vision for educational equity:** Policymakers, educators, and communities need a collective understanding of what equity means in their region. They need to have a set of goals for achieving both greater diversity and greater educational quality and equity for targeted student subgroups that are specific to the region; a measurable definition of and a means to reduce “racial isolation” at the school and classroom levels; and goals and benchmarks for greater diversity and greater equity that respond to realistic timelines and local factors.
- **Sustain efforts with equitable resources:** Policymakers, educators, and communities need should develop regionally based finance reform that allocates additional funds to the schools and students who need it most; invest in regional magnet programs, capital improvements, and teacher professional development that raises the quality of schooling options available in all districts; conduct marketing campaigns that build strong and accessible systems of public information around schooling options; provide

services for transfer students and families that include transportation, school counseling, and family liaisons; and provide continued supports for schools and for students who attend schools in their neighborhoods.

- **Create a strong data and evaluation plan:** Data monitoring allows practitioners and policymakers to test, evaluate, and adapt interdistrict plans to best serve all students. Policymakers, educators, and communities must ensure that plans are aligned to a clear vision for equity, with specific criteria for determining racial isolation or segregation and targets for reducing these conditions. They must monitor these goals using multiple measures of student success; disaggregate data across student subgroups; and ensure that data collected are visible in the community, with opportunities to incorporate stakeholder feedback effectively and in a timely manner.

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About the Learning Policy Institute

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.

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