



Equity Dispatch

Creating Equitable Integration Districts for 21st Century Students



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Equity Spotlight

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IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity

Unless our children begin to learn together, there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together.

--Justice Thurgood Marshall, *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974)

Educate

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that required desegregation of public schools in the United States (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). The story of Ruby Bridges provides a powerful narrative of racial dissention spurred by the passage of this seminal law. In 1960, Ruby rode to school with her mother and several federal marshals, climbing the steps of William Frantz Public School in New Orleans, Louisiana, to enter a formerly all-White school. As the first African American student to enter the school, Ruby spent her entire first day in the principal's office as outraged White parents protested outside or removed their children from the building. On the second day, protestors brought a Black doll in a coffin to the school building for Ruby to see as marshals walked her to the isolated classroom where she would spend much of her first year alone with a White teacher (Bridges, 2013).

In discussions of school desegregation, it can be easy to decenter the experiences of students, thinking instead about student body ratios and signifiers of quality, such as the number of certified teachers or AP math courses; however, both are important. Ruby's story is emblematic of both the perseverance and vitriol involved in the movement to desegregate public schools. It is also a potent reminder that simply enrolling Black and White students in schools together does not guarantee justice.

On this anniversary of the *Brown* decision, we recognize that school integration is still a contentious and unfinished piece of the educational social justice agenda. Recent U.S. Department of Education data (2014) remind us that disparities in the distribution of educational opportunities by race are still a vivid reality. Opportunities to learn should begin with early learning and continue throughout K-12 years in rigorous, culturally responsive learning environments for all students (Gay, 2010). Reminding ourselves of the history of desegregation, including what we have learned from the desegregation movement to this point, is worthwhile and necessary work if we are to critically examine integration as a strategy to increase access, representation, participation and full membership in high-quality and equitable learning environments, close outcomes gaps, and achieve social cohesion. Such analysis can also help us develop considerations for integration in the present.

Lessons Learned: The Historical Trajectory of Desegregation

In 1890, the state of Louisiana passed a law requiring separate railway cars for Blacks and Whites. Homer Plessy, a Black citizen of New Orleans, purchased a first class ticket and boarded a "Whites only" car, an act for which he was jailed. In a seven-to-one decision, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the separate car act, setting the precedent that separate facilities were constitutional as long as they were "equal" (Wormser, 2002). In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* renounced "separate but equal" and required desegregation of public schools "with all deliberate speed" (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). However, very little was done in the first decade, leaving 98% of Black southerners in totally segregated schools (Orfield & Lee, 2007). To spur action, federal courts began supervising the desegregation of some public school districts in the latter half of the twentieth century, returning local control only when the district achieved unitary status, which



Brenda Cassellius is the Commissioner of Education for the state of Minnesota. She earned her doctorate from University of Memphis in education leadership, organization, and policy. Prior to her elected position, Commissioner Cassellius served as a classroom teacher, principal, and superintendent for East Metro Integration District.

The Commissioner's dedication to social justice and equity is rooted in her own upbringing and informs her views on education. As a young child, Commissioner Cassellius attended Head Start programs and summer camps for underserved youth. In her teenage years, she became a counselor for the summer program she formerly attended. Her experience working with underprivileged youth exposed her to the needs of children and influenced her to go into teaching. Today, she remains committed to improving education for youth in Minnesota.

Commissioner Cassellius acknowledges that "we are in a more diverse world now and we have to be willing to look at the institutional structures and address any barriers if we hope to create a more equitable world ...opening up opportunities and access to those who have been underserved is the real answer, but that will take courage, will, persistence, and time." Recognizing that school integration is a deep-rooted historical issue, Commissioner Cassellius recognizes that schools, families, and communities will have to take a team approach to providing more equitable opportunities.

As an equity leader herself,

meant that in the court's eyes, the effects of past segregation had been "eliminated to the extent practicable" (Missouri v. Jenkins, 1995).

Reflecting on all that has happened since the Brown decision calls to mind the benefits and harms of efforts to eliminate segregation. Black children and families had to bear many of the burdens of the desegregation process because integration required assimilation into White-dominant institutions, dismantled Black institutions, and ended many Black individuals' careers (Moore, 2002). Other practices during desegregation proved harmful, such as busing Black students from within cities out to predominantly White suburban schools rather than the other way around (Woodward, 2011), tracking students of color into less rigorous classes (Welner, 2001), and disproportionately disciplining racial minority students (Fenning & Rose, 2007). In a contemporary example, Black students make up 14.5 percent of the overall student population in 2012, but only 9.2 percent of this group took advanced placement exams (CollegeBoard, 2013). This is, in some ways, a new, more covert form of segregation.

Along the same line, when federal agencies stopped aggressive enforcement of desegregation around 1990, schools began to re-segregate in more obvious ways (The Leadership Conference, 2014). This is highly problematic; because of re-segregation, almost half (46%) of the nation's Black students and close to two-fifths of Latino students (39%) attend schools with lower teacher quality (Harris, 2006, Peske & Haycock, 2006), more narrow curricula, and more emphasis on passing tests (Orfield & Lee, 2007). Students in these predominately poor and minority schools also have more limited access to high-quality curricular offerings (Oakes, 2005). Accordingly, these schools have low graduation rates (Sass, Hannaway, Xu, Figlio, & Feng, 2012). Research shows that students of color who come from low-income families are likely to perform at higher levels in diverse classrooms (Condron, 2009; Cooley, 2007). For instance, Harris (2006) indicated that African Americans and Hispanics gained higher reading scores in integrated schools where the student population is racially balanced. Moreover, low poverty schools have significantly higher achievement than other types of schools if the school is integrated (Southworth, 2010).

Resegregation is problematic not only because it concentrates students of color in highly unequal schools; it also flies in the face of a national interest in preparing students for participation in a democratic society. As Justice Sandra Day O'Conner famously said, "student body diversity is a compelling state interest;" school should not only be a place where students can improve their test scores, but also "become better citizens and better people" (Ryan, 2007, p. 133). Students who study in racially diverse environments can learn to adopt multiple perspectives and respect differences, thereby decreasing racial discrimination and artificial assumptions about other students (Nagda, 2006). Juvonen, Nishina and Graham (2006) reported that African American and Latino students felt safer in school, were less harassed by peers, felt less lonely, and had higher self-worth in more ethnically diverse classrooms. These types of environments can help reduce prejudice and cross-racial fears, increase mutual trust, respect, and acceptance (Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012). Also, by making cross-racial friends, students can gain greater capacity for multicultural navigation, and have more tolerant and inclusive viewpoints about individuals from different racial groups (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Garcés, 2008). When influenced by a positive, inclusive culture, the long-term expectations are that students can enter the workforce prepared to communicate globally, demonstrating democratic values and attitudes, and advocating for social cohesion.

How do we achieve integrated schools through strategies that benefit all students? As we attempt to continue the work of the civil rights era within districts and in schools, we need to be mindful of the lessons learned from post-Brown desegregation efforts. First, the costs or burdens of any integration effort should not be borne by students of color. Second, recalling that when predominantly Black schools were closed during post-Brown integration efforts and faculty of color were

Commissioner Cassellius has an extensive track record for making positive change for youth. She is well aware of and committed to speaking out about the systematic issues that impede the development of fully integrated schools. She has worked tirelessly across partisan lines to implement new initiatives and legislation. The Commissioner champions causes related to enhancing reading skills, increasing funds for PK-12 schools, developing alternative licensure programs, and reassessing principal and teacher evaluation laws. Commissioner Cassellius is also committed to widening access to early education programs. Her goal is to ensure that today's children are provided the same opportunities she had as a child.

Upcoming Events

Illinois

May 21, 2014

[Advancing Evaluation Implementation for Special Education Personnel Workshop](#)
O'Fallon, IL

May 22-23, 2014

[2014 Chicago International Conference on Education](#)
Chicago, IL

Indiana

April 28, 2014

[Annual Region V State Equity Leaders' Summit](#)
[College and Success Readiness: Advancing Institutional Decision-Making Processes to Achieve Equity](#)
Indianapolis, IN
Hosted by the Great Lakes Equity Center.
Contact [Ed Brown](#) for more information

May 27-31, 2014

[National Conference on Race and Ethnicity](#)
Indianapolis, IN

fired, much was lost, we need to focus on building schools that are culturally responsive and working toward representative faculty with strong community ties. Finally, simply ensuring that a school building contains a mix of White and Black or English-dominant and English-learning students does not constitute meaningful integration; true integrated schools ensure that all students have access to and participate in high-quality learning experiences that recognize, respond to, and reach across differences.

Recommendations for Creating Equitable Integration Districts

Moving toward integrated schools requires collaboration from all stakeholders, and changes should be made at all levels – from the classroom to the district, with policy support. As teachers, ongoing training and professional development that examines history, cultural biases, and culturally relevant pedagogy would be a good starting place (Brown, 2007). In this process, teachers need to ensure that difference is acknowledged positively and should be aware of the potential stereotypes they bring into the classroom (King, Artiles, & Kozleski, 2009). To access the social benefits of integration for students, teachers can initiate intergroup dialogue (Dovidio et al., 2004) to reduce prejudice towards others and promote positive perspectives toward difference. For instance, providing a safe space for a diverse group of students to share what they learned from interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds can help to clear up myths and misunderstandings. In other words, such spaces allow students to approach mutual understanding both intellectually and emotionally.

From a district level, several possible means can be used to achieve greater diversity in schools:

- Change attendance boundaries carefully to include more diverse student populations in schools. Limit the impact segregated housing may have on school diversity, and bring students to schools from different housings (types of residences such as publicly funded housing projects, rental communities and single-family homes) (Kane, Staiger, & Riegg, 2006).
- Conduct racial and economic impact assessments across the district to make sure school policies do not affect some students and communities unfavorably (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009).
- If the district already has choice or transfer programs, ensure that they further the goal of increasing diversity through outreach, recruitment, an application process, and free transportation (Wells, 2014).
- Recruit faculty and students with diversity in mind. Schools can use strategic plans to recruit diverse faculty and student bodies. For instance, they can partner with community organizations and provide mentoring services for students from particular racial or ethnic groups. Also, teachers from diverse backgrounds can educate one another and more adequately serve students from a variety of backgrounds (Villegas & Davis, 2007).

Conclusion

On the 60th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, there is still much to be done to move toward a more equitable educational system and a more just society. Students should be achieving in school and in life regardless of racial background and income level. Cohesiveness and understanding should be foundations of our society. School integration can be a meaningful practice that benefits children in the short-term and society-at-large in the long run, but it requires that we pay careful attention to our history and work across all levels of the system. This is a debt we owe to students like Ruby Bridges and families who took, at great cost, significant steps toward racial justice.

Have a question or comment about this article? [Share it here!](#)

Engage

Michigan

May 5-7, 2014

[The 74th Annual Statewide Special Education Conference](#)

Grand Rapids, MI

October 30, 2014

[Legislative, Education & Advocacy Day \(LEAD\)](#)

Lansing, MI

Minnesota

October 16-17, 2014

[2014 Education Minnesota Professional Conference](#)

St. Paul, MN

Ohio

June 16-18, 2014

[OERC Conference: Connecting Research, Practice, and Policy](#)

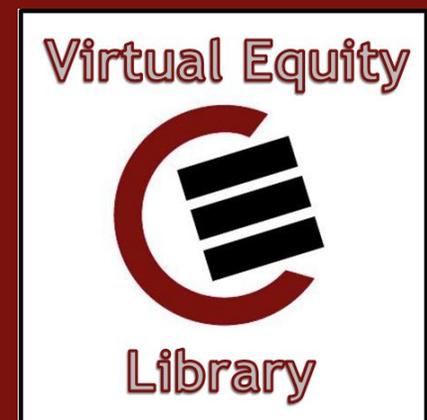
Columbus, OH

Wisconsin

April 11-12, 2014

[2014 Wisconsin Indian Education Association \(WIEA\) Conference](#)

Bayfield, WI





As one of the foundational issues in the development of the American Civil Rights Movement, the fight for school integration changed the trajectory of the both the past century and the present one. Throughout that fight, organizations such as the Urban League contributed to positive change for African Americans and other racial minorities facing discrimination. The Urban League continues to take up-- among its many causes-- the challenge of providing educational opportunities to youth and families living in urban districts. In Cleveland, the Urban League of Greater Cleveland's (ULGC) Education & Youth Development Branch acts as a connector or bilingual broker that communicates across the lines of K-12 education, higher education, corporate America, governmental agencies, and more.

The Urban League of Greater Cleveland was established in 1917 and has served African American and other minority families as they struggled against housing and employment discrimination for close to 100 years. As Cleveland began school integration, the Urban League worked to maintain strong educational experiences for urban youth. The Urban League of Greater Cleveland' Youth Education Branch has continued to promote the leadership capacity of urban youth through workshops, afterschool programs, and services that reinforce the significance of education and leadership development. UGCL does not see youth as "at-risk," but rather "at-opportunity." For instance, over the past 20 years, the Urban League has worked with Public schools on the east side to create access and opportunities for Black and Latino youth to live in the community. The Youth Education Branch also runs two programs that work with high school students. Urban Youth Empowerment Program works with juvenile offenders and helps them find employment and provides them leadership training. New Beginning Program integrates high school students into the larger community by creating jobs and internships. Overall, the Urban League is taking an active role in providing restorative justice and educational programs within 9 public schools.

As part of its mission to empower parents, the ULGC hosts regular workshops, webinars, and monthly meetings to meet the needs of parents who tend to feel underserved and underrepresented in their school communities. Its Parent Empowerment Network brings together families for workshops, which often include a focus on college access, such as developing families' awareness of financial resources. ULGC also hosts an annual tour of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) throughout the nation. Last year, ULGC brought 90 students on one of two tours to northern and southern HBCUs.

For these and all its efforts to promote equal opportunity in education, we applaud the Urban League of Greater Cleveland and wish the League continued success in promoting equity and excellence in education for urban youth.

Something to Hear!



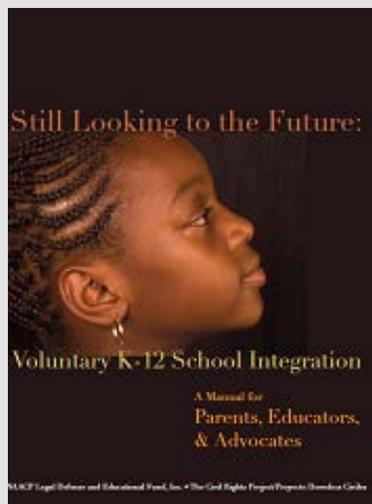
Decades Later, Desegregation Still on the Docket in Little Rock

This broadcast discusses contemporary challenges with school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas. Even though the state was a central figure during the 1950's Brown vs. Board of Education, the city continues the struggle to achieve racially diverse schools.

Something to Use!

Voluntary K-12 School Integration: A Manual for Parents, Educators, and Advocates

This manual, developed by the Civil Rights Project, was originally published in 2005 and was updated in 2008. The manual offers ideas and strategies for school integration. It contains a short history of Brown vs. Board of Education and discusses the resurgence of school segregation in today's schools. It also provides methods to help integrate schools and guidance around the political, legal, and policy issues that community stakeholders, parents, teachers, attorneys, and administrators might face as they work to racially diversify schools.



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