

# Does Integration Still Matter in Public Schools?

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Students in East Baton Rouge Parish, La.

To understand what role integration plays — or should play — in public education today, FRONTLINE spoke with Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation in Washington, D.C. Kahlenberg, who has studied the impact of segregation in schools, explains why integration matters and why he believes it should take on a new meaning in the 21st century.

**New studies have found that in some places, public schools are as segregated as they were in 1968. Does that matter?**

To my mind, it's hugely significant. If you think about the two fundamental purposes of public education, it's to promote social mobility

so that a child, no matter her circumstances, can, through a good education, go where her God-given talents would take her. The second purpose is to strengthen our democracy by creating intelligent and open-minded citizens, and related to that, to build social cohesion.

Because we're a nation where people come from all corners of the world, it's important that the public schools be a place where children learn what it means to be an American, and learn the values of a democracy, one of which is that we're all social equals. Segregation by race and by socioeconomic status significantly undercuts both of those goals.

So on the academic achievement, social mobility side, there is research going back a half century to suggest that separate schools, particularly for rich and poor, are very rarely equal. It's a disadvantage to be born into a poor family on average. It's a second disadvantage to attend a school where there are high concentrations of poverty. And this intersects very closely with race, because African-American and Latino kids are much more likely to be in high-poverty schools than white students.

And indeed there is some evidence that middle class African-American families live in neighborhoods with higher poverty than low-income whites. So it's highly racialized. To my mind this issue of segregation, which gets talked about very little, is central to undermining the twin rationales for public schooling in the first place.

**Many of our public schools are really struggling. Parents who argue for breaking away or who leave their school districts say that this isn't about race. Their only goal is to ensure a quality education for their children. Don't they have a point?**

That's the reason I emphasize poverty and economic status. When white people are accused of being racist, it ends the conversation. I don't think that's productive, even though sometimes I do think racism is at play. And certainly, parents are right to be concerned about high concentrations of poverty because there's some evidence that middle-class students will perform more poorly, on average, in high poverty schools.

But we are still a middle-class country. We still have a majority of students who are middle class, and we ought to find creative ways, reasonable ways to give many more students a chance to attend economically integrated schools where there isn't this tradeoff between quality and integration, where in fact the two go together.

### **Then, should the focus on integration today be about class, not race?**

It's increasingly about class. I wouldn't say that race has become unimportant, because it's certainly much more visible to parents. When they visit a school, they may not know the socioeconomic makeup, but get a pretty good gauge of racial makeup. But socioeconomic status has become increasingly important for two reasons.

One, as a practical matter, schools that want to integrate by race and class as a legal matter need to emphasize socioeconomic status. The Supreme Court under Chief Justice John Roberts has taken a conservative view of racial integration and struck down programs in Seattle and Louisville that relied specifically on race. So that's why we've seen a shift in emphasis over time from racial integration per se to socioeconomic integration. There are legal constraints on the ability of school districts to use race, but it's perfectly fine to use socioeconomic status. Given the unfortunate overlap between those two categories, a

socioeconomic plan will usually lead to a fair amount of racial integration as well. So part of this is pragmatic and has to do with changes in the law.

Secondly, the research in academic achievement never suggested there was something about the whiteness of the skin that benefited African-American students. It was always that low-income students of all races do better in an economically mixed environment. ... Their classmates had parents with higher education levels, which was related to higher aspirations. In middle-class schools, parents usually have more flexible jobs so they can volunteer in the classrooms. They have cars to get to PTA meetings. ... [Meanwhile], when you integrated low income and working class African-Americans and whites, there were no achievement gains.

**Is that kind of integration fair to the middle- and upper-class families, some of whom might argue that they don't want to subsidize the education of lower-income families at the expense of their own children?**

There's resistance to socioeconomic integration as there was to racial integration. But the focus of public schools is not simply the private benefit that students gain from education. If that was the goal, you should have a system that everyone pays their own way, and you should get whatever education you can afford.

We all benefit from having a higher education level among all students, and we want to tap into the talents of low-income students, African-American, Latino, Asian and white students. And we all, as a society, benefit when those investments are made.

And particularly given the evidence that it's not a zero-sum gain, more affluent students can benefit from being in an economically integrated

environment. The public interest and private interests can come together.

... [Additionally], there is a much broader recognition among young parents today that diversity and integration are going to be beneficial to their children in an increasingly diverse country, and that having exposure to individuals who have different life experiences is an asset. And working in the 21st century environment, knowing how to navigate a diverse workforce is beneficial to all backgrounds.

### **How closely linked is school segregation to housing?**

The two are intimately linked. There is a fair amount of public school choice in our country. About a quarter of the public school population attends a non-neighborhood school.

The flip side is that 75 percent still attend the physically closest public school, and our neighborhoods are highly segregated by race, by socioeconomic status. So to the extent that students attend neighborhood schools, they are likely to attend schools that reflect the residential segregation, which is hugely problematic.

### **What are some of the solutions to remedying this complex problem?**

... We've learned a lot about how to integrate schools since compulsory busing in the 1970s. There's much more of an emphasis on public school choice and magnet schools and incentives to create integrated schooling. There are lots of ways to draw kids of different backgrounds together through programs that give middle-class families an incentive to want to participate in integrated schooling. ...

One is housing programs in [places like Montgomery County, Md.](#) and elsewhere that have inclusionary zoning elements to them, so that when

developers build units they need to set aside some for working class families.

The other has to do with public school choice, and programs that provide incentives for integration. For example, in Cambridge, Mass., every school is a magnet school. Parents choose among a variety schools, and then those choices are honored with an eye to creating socioeconomically integrated schools, looking at the free and reduced lunch eligibility as a key factor. That's been a system that's been in place for a number of years now and has produced some very positive results.

### **Are there any other important factors at play?**

At the federal level, unfortunately a lot of us had quite high hopes that the Obama administration would tackle this issue, and they haven't. But there are a growing number of school districts that are recognizing that it's very, very hard to make separate but equal work.

Now there are more than 80 school districts educating more than 4 million students where there are conscious policies in place to try to break up concentrations of poverty and give low-income students a chance to attend more middle class schools.

This is a time where local school officials are ahead of the federal government. ... Local officials are increasingly recognizing that unless they address segregation, they are unlikely to make much progress on academic achievement.