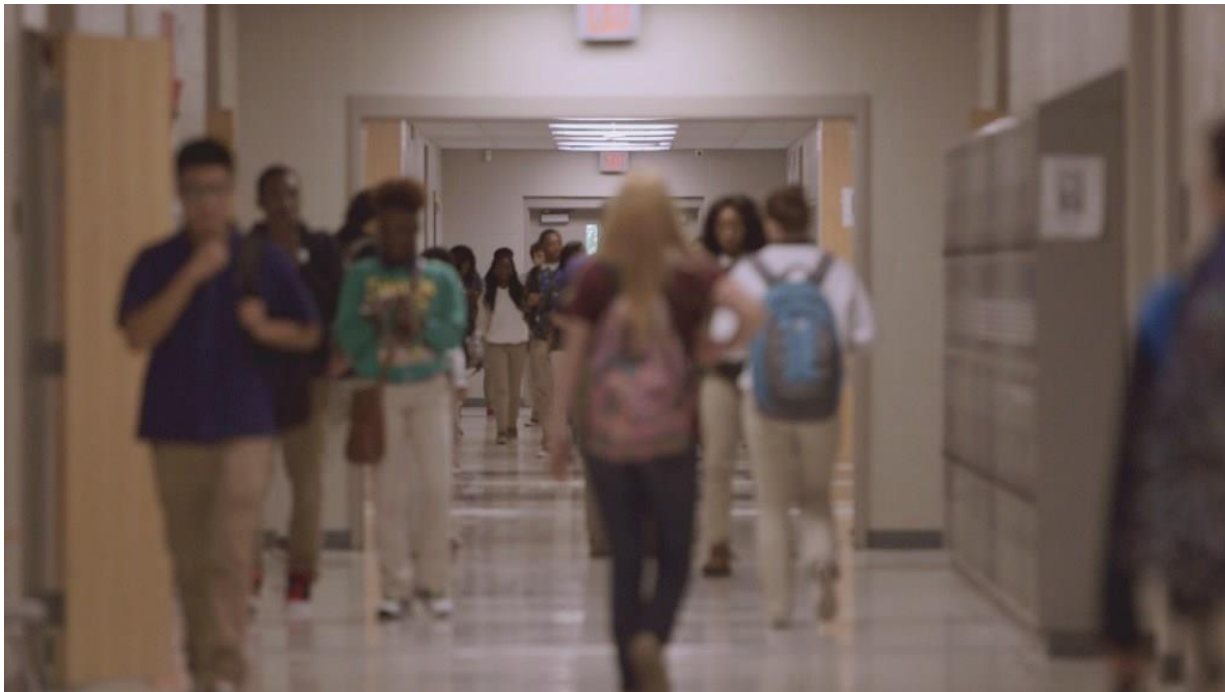


# The Uncomfortable Reality of Community Schools

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Students in East Baton Rouge Parish, La.

Neighborhood schools: Hard to take issue with such a wholesome concept, right? Kids walking to school, backpacks slung over their shoulders.

Unless your neighborhood is one of the thousands across America's blighted urban landscape, where kids, mostly minority and mostly poor, attend struggling schools.

Here's the uncomfortable reality surrounding today's neighborhood and community school's movement: More often than not these

schools are racially and economically segregated, and the parents who relish them are largely the middle class and the rich.

“The impulse to want a neighborhood school for your children is understandable,” says Warren Simmons, executive director of The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. But because schools in upper middle class, white neighborhoods are often better performing than ones in poor African-American and Latino neighborhoods, he says, when you promote them, you are essentially promoting inequality.

“You are part of the problem,” Simmons says, “not part of the solution.”

But that is certainly not how the leaders of community school movements across the country view their cause – as we saw while reporting [Separate and Unequal](#). In Baton Rouge, like in many cities, parents say they are trying to reverse what even experts agree has been a flawed experiment in school desegregation. They say they are responding to integration efforts that have failed their children – even as those programs tried to correct longstanding racial injustices.

“It’s about bringing community back to our school systems and bringing schools back to our community, “ says Norman Browning, leader of the group, Local Schools for Local Children, which is based in St. George, a mostly middle-class enclave on the southeastern edge of Baton Rouge. Browning’s group has been behind an effort to break away from the East Baton Rouge Parish School District and form a new independent school system.

Browning says the effort is not about race, noting that there would be black families in the new district. He says it’s about getting kids the best education possible — in their own neighborhoods, as opposed to

“transporting children out of the neighborhoods to go clear across town to go to school.”

“They’re failing our children because our children are not getting the education they deserve,” he says.

Browning’s allies point to previous efforts to develop neighborhood schools that they say often end up being more diverse than their detractors let on.

One day last fall, State Senator Mack “Bodi” White (R) gave us a tour of a high school in a district that broke away in 2002. While Zachary High School is less economically and racially diverse than the average Louisiana district, around 40 percent of the students are African-American and more than a third of them receive free or reduced lunch, according state education figures. What’s more, in 2013, the school got an “A” rating from the state.

“What a lot of people don’t understand is that this isn’t a real wealthy suburb district,” says White, adding, “This is middle-class, working people, and even more than that, there’s diversity.”

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## Community School Movements Across the Country

Many community school movements — such as those in Georgia, Tennessee, California, Pennsylvania, Utah, Texas and Iowa — are born out of frustration. Parents say they are tired of negotiating with the leaders of struggling school districts whose priorities are often split between those of higher-achieving children and at-risk kids.

In Malibu, Calif., a group of parents are seeking to break away from a school district they now share with the less well-off community of Santa Monica. They want to inject more arts programs into their schools and renovate the facilities without having to answer to a seven-member school board that also wants to devote money to math and literacy programs for struggling learners in Santa Monica.

Outside of Memphis, Tenn., parents in several middle-class communities that have recently broken away say they did so to achieve more “local control.” They are planning on infusing more technology into elementary school classrooms, and college prep classes into their high schools.

Economics also plays a role.

In the Salt Lake City, Utah area, middle- and upper-class communities that have sought to break away have lured converts by insisting a split would positively impact their property values. And in Baton Rouge, Browning says both the housing market and local industry have suffered in his community because young employees don’t want to buy homes in a school district where more than 40 percent of the schools received a D or F rating in 2013.

“A lot of what is motivating these middle-class families is economic stress,” says Amy Stuart Wells, a professor of sociology and education at Columbia University’s Teachers College. Her recent study on schools in the New York City suburbs found that even as those areas have gotten more diverse, their schools have remained heavily segregated.

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## So, What Happens Next?

All this is happening against a startling backdrop: American schools are more segregated than they were in 1968.

In 2011, close to 80 percent of the nation's African-American students were enrolled in mostly minority schools, according to a report released by [The Civil Rights Project](#) at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The report, which is a comprehensive effort to examine the current make-up of American schools, has put the spotlight on the community school movement and its role in the re-segregation trend.

And there is another hidden twist in this whole debate: Re-segregation runs counter to seminal education research. Educators have come to understand that what really helps poor kids get ahead is exposure to middle-class students and their families. This was first documented by researcher James Coleman in his legendary 1966 [Coleman Report](#) and it was [reaffirmed](#) in a 1997 national study, authorized by Congress.

So, what to do?

Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at The Century Foundation, has a plan. For years, he has urged school districts to assign students based on their economic make-up, particularly through magnet schools, which pull students from across a district to attend schools with themed programs or areas of concentration.

It is a plan that has, in recent years, garnered a fair amount of publicity, in large part because of a 2007 Supreme Court ruling that curbed school districts' ability to assign students to schools based on race.

During our time in Baton Rouge, we saw some of these schools. And people on both sides of the breakaway debate agree that they are impressive — but not necessarily the solution. The truly high-performing magnet schools in Baton Rouge are good, in large part, because they screen students, admitting only the ones who have scored well on standardized tests.

Then where does that leave a middle-class student who is not “gifted” or a high scorer?

One mother that we spoke to in Baton Rouge said her daughter had not been admitted to one of these magnet schools. She ended up in one of the district’s struggling high schools. The mother is now advocating for the breakaway district.

Across the nation, test scores and dropout rates suggest that many school districts are ill equipped to deal with these challenges. Only 5 percent of African-American students leaving high school are ready for college, according to a 2013 [ACT College Admissions readiness report](#), and a quarter of high school seniors [read below grade level](#).

So, until educators can persuade parents — regardless of race — that they have a viable plan that works for everyone, it’s very likely that the breakaway movements are here to stay.

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