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## **Integration and the Achievement Gap: Innovation in Dallas, Texas**

**Will Maddox, MA**

*Dallas Independent School District*

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## **Integration and the Achievement Gap: Innovation in Dallas, Texas**

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When I first began teaching at Woodrow Wilson High School in Dallas Independent School District (ISD), I taught six sections of 10<sup>th</sup> grade English and coached soccer, and while I didn't have the data to support it at the time, I quickly began to appreciate the environment my classes and teams created for students. I had the children of doctors sitting with and learning from children whose parents worked in construction or were hotel custodians. And I also had a soccer team consisting of mostly low income, minority students who benefitted from the support and resources that an upper-middle class community provided. As their teacher and coach, I saw these benefits firsthand. Students who might not have thought about college were encouraged by their peers to do well and apply to schools, and I saw wealthier students grow in their ability to interact with students and families who grew up differently than they did. This cultural exchange would not have been possible in a racially and economically homogenous school, and I was proud to play a role in this diverse environment. My vantage point as a teacher in this school allowed me to understand that diverse school populations benefit teachers, parents and families, and most importantly, students.

This editorial is a reflection on my teaching experience at Woodrow Wilson High School in Dallas ISD, a campus where there is significant student diversity in terms of socioeconomic status (SES) and race. However, first I provide some context by outlining why school integration is needed at the national level and then explain how it has been slowly dismantled since the peak of its influence in the 1970s. From there I discuss my experience at Woodrow Wilson High School within Dallas ISD, a large urban school system where socioeconomic integration efforts at the district level have become a recent focus for local policy makers, district leaders, and community stakeholders. While I provide evidence why a policy initiative towards integration is a worthwhile pursuit, I also acknowledge important tradeoffs and barriers to implementation that should be considered for any district planning to scale SES integration policies.

### **A Call for Integration**

Following *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the country slowly, and often only under threat of federal intervention, began to integrate its public schools. Because racial disparity was, and is, so closely connected to income disparity, racial integration often meant economic integration. American cities were highly segregated and integration often led to busing students across town in an effort to create mixed schools. According to Johnson (2011), this period of integration proved to be one reform with a lasting and noticeable impact on low-SES students, many of whom were overwhelmingly students of color.

Though it took several years, continued enforcement of *Brown* resulted in 91% of Black students attending schools with White children nationally by 1971 (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2009, p. 324). However, this change did not occur overnight, and research by Reardon and Owens (2014) points to the multitude of countervailing efforts that worked to slow the overall process of integration at the national level. Examples of these efforts include *freedom of choice*

plans in the South, designed to prevent integration by placing the onus on Black families to enroll their children in White schools (Clotfelter, 2004). In addition, patterns of White flight from urban areas to the suburbs during this time created stark between-district segregation, which was allowed to persist at the national level due to the Supreme Court's decision in *Miliken v. Bradley* (1974). This decision prevented interdistrict integration policies, which further exacerbated trends of White flight and left a lasting effect on the ways schools are segregated by race and class (Reardon & Owens, 2014).

These efforts to impede integration further minimizes the potential to close racial and economic achievement gaps. On examining the relationship between integration and the achievement gap, journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones (2016) cites a study released by the Century Foundation, which

found that when children in public housing in Montgomery County, Maryland, enrolled in middle-class schools, the differences between their scores and those of their wealthier classmates decreased by half in math and a third in reading, and they pulled significantly ahead of their counterparts in poor schools. (p. 31)

Additionally, in a longitudinal study measuring the lifelong impacts of students in integrated schools, Johnson (2011) concluded that school desegregation for Black students "significantly increased both educational and occupational attainments, college quality and adult earnings, reduced the probability of incarceration, and improved adult health status; desegregation had no effects on whites across each of these outcomes" (p. 2). These results confirm the tangible, and lasting benefits to students who were able to access better school resources, increased spending, and other important environmental influences.

Beyond the value of integration that these tangible resources provide, extant research explains some of the positive environmental or non-academic influences as well. Though *Brown* argued that school spending, access to resources, as well as school facilities Black students attended were inherently discriminatory, other thoughts about the experiences of minority students began to form within the research community. For example, Kahlenberg (2012) recently addressed the economic and social experience of integration:

The evidence from the racial desegregation context finds that classmates matter; and disadvantaged blacks did better in middle-income schools that were mostly white, not because blacks benefit academically from exposure to whites but because poor kids benefit from mixing with middle-class kids. (p. 2)

This research suggests that effects from peer interactions might outweigh those that result from monetary efforts, such as spending money on students and supplies, in terms of outcomes for all students. As Kahlenberg (2000) notes, in economically diverse schools, students are more likely to share classrooms with peers who are unlike themselves, which can have a positive impact on all students. Unfortunately, recent research shows that most students are more likely to attend schools that are economically and racially homogenous, minimizing the benefits of diversity for all students (Fiel, 2013).

### **Changes and Challenges of Integration**

Busing mostly non-White students out of their neighborhoods tested the practicality of implementing policies that were a result of *Brown* and presented new challenges and opportunities for families. Since schools are anchor institutions within a community, parents and

children irrespective of race and class wanted to attend their neighborhoods schools. As such, addressing problems of school inequities (i.e., school funding, per pupil expenditures, quality teaching, etc.) were at the forefront. And while most school districts ended forced busing in the 1990s, these challenges to integration were exacerbated by broader societal issues. Discriminatory housing policies enacted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century meant that schools returned to the *de facto* segregation of the pre-*Brown* ruling. Hannah-Jones (2014) calls these re-segregated schools “*apartheid schools*” where the White student population comprise one percent or less of the total student population. Drawing from research by ProPublica, Hannah-Jones documents that in recent years 53% of Black students attended apartheid schools. This same line of research finds that most of these apartheid schools are concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest, but that 12% of Black students in the South are now learning in similar contexts. Without judicial intervention, this research supports a trend that is predicted to increase (Hannah-Jones, 2014).

These data highlight the difficulty of creating integrated schools when larger societal structures exacerbate segregation by race and SES. While a parent’s desire to attend a neighborhood school is understandable, and in fact, strengthens notions of community, the entanglements of school and housing policies contribute to school re-segregation. As a result of these discriminatory housing policies, loan practices, as well as inequities in school finance, America’s cities remain starkly segregated. The impact on students means attending racially and economically homogenous schools.

### **Woodrow Wilson High School- Integration and Achievement**

Woodrow Wilson High School (Wilson), because of its history and positioning in Dallas, is one of the few examples of a naturally integrated school. In other words, Wilson’s geographical location caters to several attendance zones, serving a diverse student population in terms of race and socio-economic status. Further, since this occurrence is without mandate or influence from the district, Wilson is somewhat of an anomaly. Located three miles east of downtown between a historically Latino, working class neighborhood and a middle to upper class White neighborhood, Wilson borders White Rock Lake and is a unique microcosm of diversity.

In 1971, when Dallas ISD was ordered by courts to integrate its schools, Wilson was already 20-25% Black and Hispanic (Lyons, 1979). In 1966, the school began accepting Black students. By 1978, Wilson was 51% White, the very percentage the district would try and engineer almost 40 years later in order to promote integration. In the 1970s as well as today, Wilson’s attendance zone straddles socio-economic lines, bringing together students who, according to demographers, can make a big impact on student achievement and later-life outcomes for low-income students (Lyons, 1979). Today, the school is decidedly less White at 25%, but the school remains more integrated than Dallas ISD, which is only seven percent White (Dallas Independent School District, 2016). The integrated nature of the school, where the children of lawyers and doctors go to school with students who will be the first in their family to go to college, is an example of the mutual benefits to integrating schools (Kahlenberg, 2000). While the school has a student body that is 60% economically disadvantaged, it benefits from a

quality arts and sports programs supported by robust parental involvement and motivated boosters.

These factors strengthen the experience of all students at Wilson, however, the school's data also support the academic and non-academic results from integration. Wilson received the top scores compared to other schools in the state on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) End of Course exams (EOC) and received all seven accountability distinctions from the Texas Education Agency. These seven distinctions include achievement in the four core subjects, but more importantly, they include measures for student progress and closing achievement gaps between low and high achieving students (Texas Education Agency, 2016). Wilson has achieved distinctions for the last four years (Mitchell, 2016). While there are many factors contributing to the achievement of all students at Wilson, integration could be an important factor at play. Wilson and Hillcrest High School, which is similarly integrated and supported by the community, were the only two non-magnet high schools in Dallas ISD to earn these achievement distinctions. Overall, these results speak volumes about the power of integration.

### **Examining Teacher Experience: A Self-Reflection on Working in an Integrated School**

As a teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School, I can attest to the benefits of an integrated school community. Watching my racially and economically diverse students learn from each other creates interesting discussions and ensures that my students learn tolerance. Emma Pfundheller, a Wilson senior, realizes the value of attending a diverse school:

Going to a diverse school with students that have different socioeconomic status from me has benefitted me by giving me the opportunity to be able to make friendships with a wide range of people. They have greatly impacted my life and I can honestly say they have made me a more well-rounded person.

The diversity Emma and others experience in high school also leads to lifelong skillsets which will be beneficial when dealing with those who may have different racial, economic, or cultural backgrounds.

The benefits of economically diverse schools on students' lives are clear, but teachers also gain from these environments. The resources provided by a middle-class community works for all students, and thus teaching and learning improves. For example, guest speakers from our parent pool provide real-world examples of concepts related to the curriculum. When our class read *Persepolis*, a graphic novel about the Iranian Revolution and the aftermath, I asked one of our parents who is a graphic novel illustrator to speak to our class about the power of graphic novels and how they communicate literary themes. Further, the availability of a diverse group of parents who regularly volunteer their time and participate in school activities is another important contribution to our school.

While many schools struggle to engage parents, I believe our school benefits from the range of ideas and perspectives from different parents and families. For instance, a new Flamenco dance program initiated by Latino students and families showcase the cultures and traditions of our Latino community members. Parents choosing to send their kids to Wilson anecdotally support the benefits of an environment diverse in terms of race and SES. A Wilson

mother, Kathy Dame, whose three children attended Wilson and its feeder pattern speaks highly of the natural integration her children experienced:

One of the most impacting experiences we enjoyed happened in kindergarten. In mid-October, a little girl showed up - didn't know any English and was terrified. This brilliant teacher introduced her to the class and told them that everyone needed to help her. She also told the class that she was really smart and that with their help she would be a great student. The next day the kids showed up with stickers to put on her papers. Some kids made homemade flash cards. This little girl was super successful and the whole class was so proud of her.

Margaret Hale, who is Kathy Dame's daughter and a 2007 graduate, reflects:

I find that it not only allowed me to understand the similarities that I shared with peers of different backgrounds, it also helped me to understand how lucky I was to have so many resources. I think that this exposure helped develop my interest in working with disadvantaged communities.

Furthermore, these types of interactions are noted by both parents and teachers, highlighting some of the ways in which the whole school community is exposed to the day to day benefits of integration. Melinda O'Connell is an Astronomy teacher whose daughter attended Wilson:

As a teacher, I get to witness the disintegration of racial stereotypes in a generation. My students don't care about skin color. They choose their friends the same way. The cool kids all hang out together, but all the races are represented. The jocks all hang together, but all races are represented. The robotics team hangs out together, but all races are represented. You get the picture.

An integrated school community allows for diverse perspectives provided from parents, and more opportunities to meet the needs of all students. Overall, my perspective as a teacher working in an integrated school environment allows me to see that a diverse school population benefits all students in the areas of academic achievement, future outcomes, and empathy.

### **Making the Case for Integration in Dallas**

Dallas ISD is currently what Hannah-Jones (2014) would consider an "apartheid district." Dallas ISD, with a 90% poverty rate, is not much different than other large urban districts nationwide. In fact, as noted in a Pew Research Center report, "when it comes to high concentrations of upper-income households in upper-income neighborhoods, San Antonio, Houston, and Dallas lead the nation's top 30 metropolitan areas," and in 2010, Dallas had close to a quarter of their upper-income households located in majority upper-income tracts (Fry & Taylor, 2012, p. 15). Among the 50 most populous school districts in the country, Dallas ISD is a microcosm of racial and economic segregation due to White flight and the proliferation of private schools.

As a result of this segregation in Dallas, White students who live within the district increasingly attend private or magnet schools and experience less interaction with non-White students. In the decade between 2001 and 2011, Dallas ISD's population of White students went from a low 7.2% to 4.7%, further minimizing the possibility for integrated schools and diverse learning and cultural experiences. Moreover, 44% of Black students went to a majority White school at the end of the 1980s, but by 2011, that figure was 23.2% (Epperly, 2014). Dallas ISD

is an example of the nationwide re-segregation of public school systems, a pattern that negatively impacts the academic performance of the students served.

From a historical lens, policy solutions for integration often raise two questions: Is the solution a practical and efficient use of public resources with a clear aim to disrupt segregation? And who benefits and who is disadvantaged? Within the past decade, school districts have adopted choice schools as a model for integration. Choice schools, which are similar to public charter schools, offer entry to a school by lottery, irrespective of where the student lives, and, in fact, require a certain percentage of students from different economic brackets. These schools are managed by public school districts and could potentially create a socio-economically (and thus racially) integrated student population. Recently, Dallas ISD has adopted the School Choice Initiative as a policy solution to integration. As school districts attempt to address school re-segregation, these questions remain central.

### **School Choice Initiative: The Solution to Integration?**

In Dallas ISD, the School Choice Initiative aims to combat segregation in the district. This initiative involves the creation of new schools, run and operated by DISD, that are open to enrollment for students living anywhere in the district. They differ from the typical charter school or district-run charter school in that the application process will employ a lottery with preferential weights based on a student's SES. This policy approach is also nationally recognized as the "diverse by design" school movement. As stated in a Dallas ISD memorandum, "the optimal enrollment strategy for our economic diversity pilots is to work towards a 50/50 enrollment mix," where half of the student body is considered economically disadvantaged, allowing the district to "serve as many low-income students as possible while at the same time creating an economically diverse environment in which all students will thrive" (Koprowski, 2014, p. 2).

Ideally, choice schools should be placed in areas that are already diverse by measures of income (which are hard to find in Dallas) in order to reduce transportation costs. These areas should also offer an array of curricular and instructional models, such as Montessori and STEM academies to attract middle and upper middle-class families who might typically select a private school for their educational needs. Though the placement of these schools in diverse neighborhoods limits scalability, the impact of choice schools may sway public opinion enough to make scalable diversity a reality in Dallas.

Although these particular models of choice schools have only been around for a few years, the diversity they have attracted in Dallas is promising. One such school is the district-run Innovation, Design, Entrepreneurship Academy (IDEA) in East Dallas. This new DISD choice school is intentionally designed to enroll an economically diverse student and family population, is focused on entrepreneurship, and explicitly incorporates supports for social and emotional learning. Innovative models like IDEA have started to attract middle-class families who in past years departed for private schools and the suburbs. With increased diversity, the aforementioned benefits of integration are evident.

Dallas ISD's model of pursuing socio-economic integration is a bold move. Facing an uphill battle, choice schools maintain higher expenditures due to transportation costs and

schools' unique curricular offerings, such as Montessori and entrepreneurship instructional models. It is also clear that choice schools are by no means a panacea. Until there is a major overhaul of affordable housing policy in Dallas and most major American cities, choice schools remain one of many solutions needed to create truly diverse and integrated schools.

### Conclusion

I do not pretend to know how to politically make racial and economic integration possible. However, more affordable housing spread throughout the city, an increase in busing, and a public attitude shift are all necessary to bring about reform. While the *Brown* case made integration the law of the land, our cities have become increasingly segregated where neighborhood schools no longer serve diverse student populations.

I think policies to create choice schools, like those enacted in Dallas ISD, by blending an engineered mix of income levels should also be part of the solution. While parents might not choose to send their kids across town to add diversity, creating unique schools that attract middle-class parents back to public schools should be part of the process. To date, the previously discussed Dallas ISD School Choice Initiative shows promise, but problems remain. The question will always be how to scale this initiative to benefit all students. Further, how do schools districts equitably resource schools serving low-income students and students of color to fully maximize opportunities and services present in middle and upper class neighborhoods? Such an initiative requires a full commitment to racial and economic integration with unique school models to promote diverse environments.

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**Will Maddox** is a former English teacher and coach at Woodrow Wilson High School in Dallas, TX who is now a writer for *The Advocate*, a hyper-local publication in Dallas.

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