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RESEARCH-BASED OPTIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

Housing Policy

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Educational opportunities, and therefore life chances, have long been tied to family wealth and to housing, with more advantaged communities providing richer opportunities. Recognizing the key role of housing in this system, equity-minded reformers have proposed four types of interventions: (a) school improvement policies; (b) school choice policies; (c) school desegregation policies; (d) wealth-focused policies; and (e) housing-focused policies. Each of these is discussed below, with an emphasis on the final option.

School Improvement Approaches

The potential of high-quality schools to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty is real but is also dangerously over-hyped. Two points deserve emphasis. First, we as a nation have never come close to making the sustained, major investments that would be needed for a serious policy intervention of this type. In an inefficient and cruel system that accepts concentrated poverty as a dominant feature of the nation's landscape, schools in those communities are being asked to provide opportunities to learn that are so enriching and well-supported that they fully overcome the food insecurity, housing insecurity, employment insecurity and other obstacles placed in front of the school's students. Second, these systemic obstacles will

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always be cleared by a small number of exceptional, fortunate children. But celebrating a Horatio Alger story of a child who beat the odds should never blind us to the reality of the odds themselves. Housing that is starkly segregated by race and income is a primary source of those troubling odds.

School improvement efforts can help mitigate the harms of segregated housing and can lead to more children finding success. Best schooling practices and finance reforms that direct greater resources are well within our reach; these approaches can and should be pursued. But they are unlikely to fully address those harms.

School Choice Approaches

For decades, school choice has been proposed as a way to break the link between segregated housing and segregated schools.¹ When school assignment is based on neighborhood catchment area, wealthier families have more options in choosing schools since they have more options in housing. School choice can, in theory, open up the same options for all families and thereby result in more diverse schools. But the same forces that drive housing segregation—such as inequality in parental income, wealth, and education, as well as language barriers and racial animus, misunderstanding, and fear—also drive segregation through school choice mechanisms. Accordingly, far from mitigating the educational segregation caused by housing patterns, school choice can and often does add a layer of segregation on top of housing segregation.² This common pattern, however, does not necessarily mean that school choice cannot be used as a tool for desegregation. Unless choice is carefully used as a tool within a system expressly designed to advance diverse schools, evidence suggests that it will not be successful in accomplishing that goal.³

School Desegregation Approaches

Among the policy options that desegregate schools are (a) controlled-choice approaches, whereby school choices are offered but constrained by their potential to increase segregation; and (b) the location of schools and drawing of enrollment boundaries in order to increase the likelihood of more diverse schools. These approaches can make a difference, but they are not widely used.

Wealth-Focused Approaches

Policies such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and the minimum wage, as well as supports offered through robust safety-net programs, are designed to address some root causes of housing inequality and segregation. Wealth inequality is even greater than income inequality and explains even more of our measured achievement gaps.⁴ But U.S. safety-net programs are not robust, the meager minimum wage does not lift families out of poverty, and there are few signs that wealth-focused approaches are being taken seriously enough to drive changes in housing segregation.

Housing-Focused Approaches

The segregated housing patterns existing throughout the US did not arise in a vacuum. Policy choices, often grounded in discrimination, resulted in the splitting of towns by interstate highways, inequitable zoning, dense public housing located away from more affluent areas, rationed Section 8 (rent subsidy) vouchers that provide very limited access, the red-lining of properties and the unavailability in black neighborhoods of FHA-insured mortgages—all of which have created an absence of affordable and accessible housing.⁵ Inequitable policies are perhaps best highlighted by the reality that government has provided more housing assistance to the relatively wealthy, through deductible mortgage interest, than to the poor, through public housing and housing vouchers.⁶ One result has been the transformation of our inner cities and many rural areas into highly concentrated, under-funded and self-reinforcing enclaves of poverty.⁷ As poverty becomes more concentrated, schools lose financial, social, and cultural capital.

An alternative approach that shows some promise is inclusionary zoning—policies that use incentives to encourage developers to build affordable housing in otherwise high-cost neighborhoods. A well-designed study of such a policy in Montgomery County, Maryland found that achievement gaps were substantially reduced for students in families that benefited from this housing option and attended an elementary school with low poverty rates.⁸ Importantly, the benefits appear to arise from the housing stability and the access to low-poverty neighborhoods, in addition to attending low-poverty schools.

Documenting the benefits of integrated neighborhoods and schools has been elusive, because the integration itself has been fleeting.⁹ As Amy Stuart Wells has recently described, however, we now have a golden opportunity to succeed where we have failed in the past.¹⁰ Many areas are experiencing a “great inversion,” where gentrified and more affluent buyers move into economically depressed urban areas while boundaries around the city center are becoming more porous, with families moving into the suburbs. In both locations, the result is greater integration—at least temporarily. Wells explains that stabilizing these communities depends in part on changing how schools get reputations for being “good” or “bad”—and she argues that younger generations are more open to embracing diverse schools as good schools. Even where parents overtly support school integration, they make their own placement decisions based on word of mouth and informal contacts with their peers. In turn, this becomes associated with race. Thus, “school quality is constructed by social groups” and intellectual commitment is overcome by parental peer influences.¹¹ School desegregation efforts have a natural limit of effectiveness, as do housing integration programs. Deliberate and sustained efforts are needed in both realms.¹²

Recommendations:

- Multiple approaches can and should be implemented as a united set of mutually supportive initiatives. Addressing housing and income should not preclude school improvement, and policies that use carefully crafted and focused school choice as a tool for integration can also be potentially helpful.
- Closing housing-associated opportunity gaps will require a broad coalition of governmental agencies, zoning administrators, realtors and others.
- School desegregation policies should be more widely employed.

- Zoning and planning ordinances should require residential developers to provide a balanced, mixed and equitable compliment of affordable housing in all plans.
- Governmental supports and resources should be provided to schools serving integrated, diverse populations, making them and their diversity particularly attractive and appealing for parents.
- Reform should take advantage and build upon shifting and positive attitudes, particularly among younger generations.
- School-improvement approaches should be careful to avoid negative labeling of schools that encourages segregation. School-quality labels based on test scores provide little useful information; they can and should be replaced with information about actual learning opportunities and the healthiness of the school environment. States and local governments can take advantage of the new requirements in federal law (ESSA) to advance these shifts in thinking.

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