



School Integration: A Path Forward



In the wake of a series of U.S. Supreme Court cases that have [sounded the death knell](#) for affirmative action in college admissions and [made it difficult](#) for K-12 districts to avoid racial segregation, it can seem like the Civil Rights Movement never happened. The nation has moved to a pre-*Brown* state of affairs in which separate and unequal is often accepted as the status quo.

Yet a new series of essays commissioned by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) refuses to accept a doom and gloom view on school integration. In *Integration and Equity 2.0*, academics, advocates, and practitioners share a fresh vision for integration that's informed by research and professional experience from fields including education, housing, and law. The focus on “integration” rather than “desegregation” is deliberate, NEPC Fellows [Robert Kim](#) of the Education Law Center and [H. Richard Milner IV](#) of Vanderbilt University write in their [prologue](#) to the project:

Whereas the latter term [desegregation] is undeniably historical—referring to the court-ordered dismantling of Jim Crow and the separate-but-equal doctrine—the former [integration] suggests something deeper. That is, integration suggests more than simply forming a community of students of diverse backgrounds within the same schools; it advances the idea that students from different backgrounds have access to or benefit from supportive systems, practices, policies, resources, and overall conditions in those schools.

The essays propose multiple paths forward informed by research, policy, and promising

local initiatives. In an essay entitled *Adapting to Adaptive Discrimination in Educational Policy*, [Kathryn McDermott](#) of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and NEPC Fellow [Janelle Scott](#) of UC Berkeley, [Elizabeth DeBray](#) of University of Georgia, [Erica Frankenberg](#) of Pennsylvania State University, and [Genevieve Siegel-Hawley](#) of Virginia Commonwealth University offer ways for the federal government to further school integration:

- Increased use of guidance letters and voluntary grant programs can create incentives for districts and states to adopt integration policies.
- The executive branch can amplify its provision of public information and supply of technical support.
- The federal government can also step up enforcement of existing anti-discrimination laws, such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.
- Federally funded research can assess the impact of integration efforts, disseminating information on promising and successful approaches.

In *A Multidimensional Approach to School Diversity in New Jersey and Beyond*, [Danielle Farrie](#) of the Education Law Center, [David Sciarra](#) of the Learning Policy Institute, and Kim focus on a case called *Latino Action Network v. New Jersey*, which the authors describe as possessing the potential to create “real momentum in school desegregation at a statewide level, not witnessed in decades.” The lawsuit aims to mitigate segregation throughout the state of New Jersey with the goal of revamping interdistrict school choice so that it furthers integration; linking integration to school finance reform; and reducing residential segregation by expanding affordable housing.

In fact, earlier this month, the trial court judge in the case [ruled](#) that New Jersey has in fact systematically failed to address the problem of racial segregation in its public schools. The plaintiffs, he wrote, “have demonstrated marked and persistent racial imbalance in numerous school districts across the state that defendants’ actions, policies, programs, and inaction have failed to remedy.” (Because the judge did not accept the plaintiff’s argument regarding state wrongs that were even more systemic, the plaintiffs are now considering an appeal.)

In *School Rezoning: Essential Practices to Promote Integration and Equity*, Siegel-Hawley along with [Andrene Castro](#) and [Kim Bridges](#) of Virginia Commonwealth University and [Terrence Wilson](#) of the Intercultural Development Research Association offer research-based ideas for K-12 leaders about advocating for rezoning school attendance boundaries to further integration. This advice includes emphasizing the benefits of school diversity; explaining how historic practices of housing discrimination and segregation have shaped the community; setting clear and measurable goals related to integration; and prioritizing integration during the rezoning process rather than allowing other factors such as transportation schedules or boundaries such as rivers or roads to set and dominate the agenda.

Community Development for Integrated Schools: The Detroit Choice Neighborhoods Initiative ([Sarah Winchell Lenhoff](#) of Wayne State University; [DeMarcus Jenkins](#) of the University of Pennsylvania; and NEPC Fellow [Huriya Jabbar](#) of the University of Southern California and [Kara Finnigan](#) of the University of Michigan) describes a cross-sector effort to develop

an integrated community in Detroit's Corktown neighborhood. The project involves creating a mixed-income early childhood center and bolstering the local schools with wraparound services such as tutoring, replacing low-income housing with mixed-income residences, and encouraging community cohesion through the development of parks and community centers where residents can gather.

The conclusion to the collection, again authored by Kim and Milner, emphasizes the urgency of addressing and prioritizing school integration:

It does not escape us that we live in an era when threats to justice are at their peak—not only for individual students and educators, but for the entire public education sector and our democracy. If we have a fighting chance at helping the communities most vulnerable to inequity and injustice, then we must carefully consider the ideas offered in this volume (and additional ones not considered here) and make concerted efforts to support them.

NEPC Resources on School Segregation

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