Research Brief

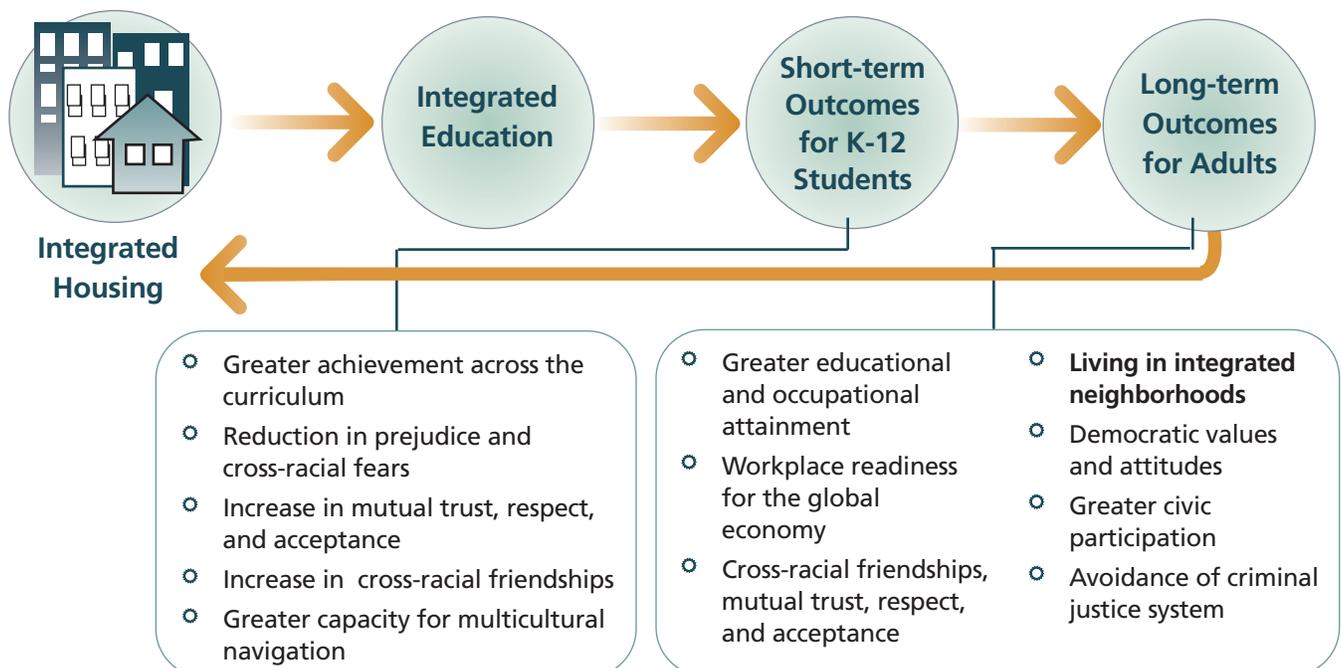## The Reciprocal Relationship Between Housing and School Integration

By Roslyn Arlin Mickelson

Given the common practice of assigning students to neighborhood schools, any serious hope of integrating America's public education system requires us to consider not only educational policies and practices, but also the demography of neighborhoods and the housing policies that contribute to residential integration or segregation. Most American students live in communities that are dominated by families from one race and socioeconomic status. Public schools typically reflect their neighborhood demographics because most students are assigned to schools based on their residence.[1] These straightforward dynamics underlie the relationship between the integration or segregation of schools and their feeder neighborhoods.

The links between integration or segregation of schools and neighborhoods are also reciprocal. This essay summarizes the social science evidence on the reciprocal relationship between integrated schooling and integrated housing. The synergistic nature of this relationship unfolds across the life course. The model in Figure 1 illustrates the connections between housing and school integration and the intergenerational and reciprocal nature of their relationship.

Model of Dynamics of Integrated Housing, Integrated Education, and Short- and Long-term Outcomes in Multiethnic Democratic Societies

Integrated Housing → **Integrated Education** → **Short-term Outcomes for K-12 Students** → **Long-term Outcomes for Adults**

- Greater achievement across the curriculum
- Reduction in prejudice and cross-racial fears
- Increase in mutual trust, respect, and acceptance
- Increase in cross-racial friendships
- Greater capacity for multicultural navigation

- Greater educational and occupational attainment
- Workplace readiness for the global economy
- Cross-racial friendships, mutual trust, respect, and acceptance

- **Living in integrated neighborhoods**
- Democratic values and attitudes
- Greater civic participation
- Avoidance of criminal justice system

Segregated schools are highly effective delivery systems for unequal educational opportunities. Conversely, a substantial body of high quality social science research indicates integrated education has a positive role in a number of desirable short- and long- term school outcomes. Racially and socioeconomically diverse schools make a significant difference for K-12 achievement across the curriculum: Students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds who attend diverse schools are more likely to have higher test scores and better grades compared to those who attend schools with high concentrations of low-income and disadvantaged minority youth. They also are more likely to graduate from high school, to attend integrated colleges,[2] and to graduate from college.[3]

Diverse schools also promote other positive outcomes that are integral components of the adult life-course trajectory. Interracial contact fosters reductions in prejudice and fear while it increases the likelihood of cross-racial friendships initially among students and later among adults.[4] Together these short-and long-term educational outcomes facilitate racial diversity across other institutional contexts, including the workplace, throughout the life-course.[5] The social science research on this relationship indicates that those who lived in integrated neighborhoods and attended diverse schools as children are more likely to choose to live in integrated neighborhoods as adults, where they then send their own children to integrated schools. This cycle interrupts the intergenerational perpetuation of racial fears and prejudice that racial segregation reinforces.[6]

Direct Links

There are several direct connections between diverse schooling and integrated housing. Let's begin with the obvious: if students are assigned to schools based on their residence, which increasingly is the norm, the demographic composition of neighborhoods will largely shape the racial and socioeconomic composition of the schools. While there is not a one-to-one relationship between the two because of private school enrollments and other factors, at any given point in time, integrated neighborhoods are more likely to produce diverse schools than segregated residential communities.

There is another direct connection between diverse schooling and integrated housing. Perceived "school quality" influences housing choices. School demographic composition serves as signal of "school quality" to many homebuyers of all races and SES backgrounds. Research indicates that prior experiences with integrated schooling shapes adult housing preferences for diverse neighborhoods that will likely have integrated schools. Just as integrated neighborhoods are socially constructed as good places to live compared to racially isolated high poverty areas, racially isolated schools are widely considered as undesirable by families that have options.[7]

Indirect Links

There are a number of indirect connections between integrated schools and diverse neighborhoods. The crux of these connections is the significantly superior opportunities to learn that integrated schools offer compared to racially isolated, high poverty schools. Armed with strong educational credentials and intercultural navigation skills, graduates of integrated schools are better candidates for jobs in the increasingly diverse and globalizing labor market than their counterparts who attend segregated schools.

Diverse Coworkers

The reciprocal and intergenerational nature of the links between housing and school integration has been well documented by researchers. Adults who attend integrated K-12 schools are more likely to have higher academic achievement and attainment, to attend and graduate from an integrated college,

and to work in a diverse setting. They will exhibit greater workforce readiness for occupations that require interacting with customers and coworkers from all racial background, and functioning in an increasingly global economy. Adults who attended diverse secondary schools are more likely to prefer working in diverse settings as adults,[8] although this relationship appears stronger among Blacks than Whites.[9] They are less likely to be involved with the criminal justice system and there is some evidence that they will earn more income than those who attend segregated schools. Adults who attended diverse schools are more likely to have cross-racial friendships and exhibit mutual trust, respect, and acceptance of those who are racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically different from themselves.[10]

Diverse Neighbors

Childhood experiences with integrated neighborhoods and diverse schools increase the likelihood of adults choosing to live in an integrated neighborhood as an adult.[11] The experience of attending segregated schools has intergenerational consequences for adults' choices of same or different race neighbors. Students who attended more racially isolated elementary, middle, and high schools are more likely as adults to prefer same race neighbors compared to adults who have attended integrated schools. This connection holds even though neighborhood racial isolation during childhood remains strongly associated with young adults' preferences for same race neighbors. Racial isolation in schools plays a more significant role in diminishing social cohesion among young adults from all racial and ethnic groups. These findings support a key tenet of perpetuation theory, which suggests that school segregation leads to segregation across the life-course and across institutional contexts.[12]

The Reciprocal Nature of School and Housing Integration Across the Generations

In a nutshell, the preponderance of social science indicates that integrated schools foster better academic outcomes for all students. Students with better K-12 academic outcomes are more likely to have higher educational and occupational attainment, greater income, and greater opportunities to choose good neighborhoods in which to live and raise their families. They are more likely to choose to live in an integrated neighborhood, in part, because their interracial contact experiences in integrated K-12 schools and colleges broke the intergenerational transmission of racial prejudice and fear. People who develop multicultural navigation skills in integrated schools are more likely to purchase homes or rent apartments in diverse neighborhoods where their own children will enroll in an integrated school. For them, racially and socioeconomically diverse schools signal that the schools most likely are good ones. In these ways, integrated schools and neighborhoods are likely to foster a mutually reinforcing intergenerational cycle across the life-course that advances social cohesion in a multiethnic democratic society and promotes racial equality.

Policy Considerations

The residential basis of most pupil assignment plans means that housing policies have become de facto education policies. Thus, there are enduring public consequences of private housing choices for the racial, ethnic, and SES composition of K-12 schools. The reciprocal nature of the housing/education linkage is clear: the quality of local schools is one of the key features by which buyers make decisions about housing purchases. Racially integrated, low poverty schools are signals to prospective homebuyers and renters that the local schools are desirable for their children.

Given that the short- and long-term outcomes of integrated education are critical for advancing social cohesion in multiethnic democratic societies, it is becoming increasingly important to develop policies that build upon the reciprocal relationship between integrated education and integrated housing. Doing so is especially important because of federal and state courts' retrenchment with respect to court ordered desegregation, the reluctance of policy makers' at all governmental levels to voluntarily design integrated pupil assignment plans, and the growing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of the K-12 student populations.

Research and experience demonstrate the benefits of integrated education and the harms of racially isolated, concentrated poverty schools. Attempting to create education policy for integrated schools without developing housing policies for integrated neighborhoods is akin to cleaning the air on one side of a screen door.[13] Coordinating federal, state, and local housing and education policies will foster greater residential and educational diversity and assist in breaking the intergenerational transmission of racial and socioeconomic disadvantages that segregated schools and segregated housing both reflect and perpetuate.

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Endnotes

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5   The findings summarized here are archived in a searchable database at: http://sociology.uncc.edu/people/rmicklsn/spivackFrameset.html. This research is supported by grants from the American Sociological Association, the National Science Foundation, and the Poverty & Race Research Action Council.

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9   Kurlaender &Yun, *Fifty Years After* Brown, *SUPRA* note 8; Kurlaender &Yun, *Is Diversity a Compelling Educational Interest?*, *SUPRA* note 8; Kurlaender &Yun, *Measuring School Racial Composition*, *SUPRA* note 8.

10   Stearns, *SUPRA* note 8.

11   Roslyn Arlin Mickelson & Mokubung Nkomo, *Integrated Schooling, Life Course Outcomes, and Social Cohesion in Multiethnic Democratic Societies*, 36 REV. RES. EDUC. (forthcoming 2012).

12   Braddock & Gonzales, *SUPRA* note 8.

13   Id.; Butler, *SUPRA* note 4.

14   Here I adapt Jean Anyon's metaphor about school reform to the synergistic nature of housing and education diversity. See Jean Anyon, GHETTO SCHOOLING 168 (1997).