

# INTEGRATING SCHOOLS BY FAMILY INCOME: A PROMISING EDUCATION REFORM OR UNATTAINABLE DREAM?

**By Robin Kane**  
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*Abstract: Integrating public schools by family income is a relatively new proposal in the education reform debate. To enhance equity in education, advocates have sought approaches that will not meet the judicial resistance that race has met when used to integrate schools. This paper provides a review of the proposal to integrate public schools by family income. It examines research on achievement by students of all income levels in schools with concentrated poverty, trends in racial segregation, and the case in support of plans to balance schools by family income. The paper also provides a summary of the plans in place in two school districts, the response of key policy players to these plans, and the possible challenges to wider implementation.*

**Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery.**

*Horace Mann*

## INTRODUCTION

In each decade of the last century and continuing into the current one, advocates have proposed new ideas to reform the U.S. public school system. At their core, most of the reforms under consideration at any time promote either excellence in student achievement or equity in student opportunity. Proponents may characterize a method as advancing both ideals, but rarely does the implementation achieve both results.

One reform proposal, though in its infancy, offers to advance both excellence and equity and to correct the current trend toward more racially segregated schools. Integrating schools by family income – whereby no student attends a predominantly low-income school – is premised on the theory that excellence cannot be achieved without equity. Because of numerous studies showing the negative relationship between high poverty schools and academic achievement by students of all income levels, this reform proposes that neither low-income nor middle-income students should be assigned to schools with high concentrations of poverty. By using family income as a factor in school assignment, one can reconfigure schools throughout most of the nation to have a majority of non-poor students in each district. In doing so, the advocates of the proposal claim, achievement would rise and in addition, integration by race, as well as class, would be accomplished.

Specifically, one version of this concept would reconfigure schools so that no more than fifty percent of

the students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals (known as FARM) – a common demarcation in education policy between poor and middle-income students. There are nearly 15,000 school districts nationwide. Currently about twenty-five percent of public schools have majority FARM-eligible students. According to one proponent, the nation can eliminate majority poor schools by reconfiguring school assignment within eighty-six percent of these districts. In the remaining fourteen percent of districts with majority FARM eligible students, reconfiguring would need to occur across district boundaries (Century Foundation, 2000b, pp. 3-4; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001b).

This paper will consider the case in support of plans to balance schools by family income, the plans in place in two school districts, the response of key policy players, and the possible challenges to wider implementation. It seeks to reveal whether integrating schools by family income is an education reform proposal for which support will grow or one that may face a future among the discarded efforts of the past.

After the triple effects of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the U.S. devoted much energy, albeit briefly, to attempting to remedy the educational inequities faced by African

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American students. These inequities were due to both *de jure* discrimination (the dual system of segregated schools) and *de facto* discrimination (discrimination after the fact, based on formally and informally segregated housing practices). However, the 1974 decision in *Milliken v. Bradley* limited the option of desegregating across city/suburban school district boundary lines, which dramatically stifled efforts to desegregate. Furthermore, courts have issued decisions dropping decades-old orders to end desegregation in school districts that are still segregated by race, and they have limited the use of race as a factor in making decisions about school assignments. After the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the U.S. turned its attention to issues of excellence, as described by William F. Tate (1996), an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a scholar of educational equity and the political dimensions of African American education. Most of the reforms under consideration today, such as efforts promoting higher standards, merit pay for teachers, and vouchers for a limited number of private and parochial schools, continue to press issues of excellence in achievement for some, rather than equity of opportunity for all.

At the same time, “segregation continued to intensify throughout the 1990s,” according to a report by Harvard University Professor Gary Orfield of the Harvard Civil Rights Project (2001, p. 3). The U.S. is “an overwhelmingly metropolitan society, dominated by its suburbs,” the report noted, “while the suburbs are becoming far more differentiated by race and ethnicity and the lines of racial change have moved out far beyond the central cities.” Segregation strikes at the very heart of the ideal of a common school, as promoted by Horace Mann. It has also undermined the excellence in achievement for disadvantaged children in the nation’s poorest school districts.

## SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT, AND SEGREGATION

### *Poverty and Achievement Studies*

Repeated studies during the past 40 years have shown a correlation between a student’s educational achievement and the family’s socioeconomic status. These studies show a similar and separate relationship between a student’s educational achievement and the wider socioeconomic status of the school he or she attends, independent of the student’s own economic status.

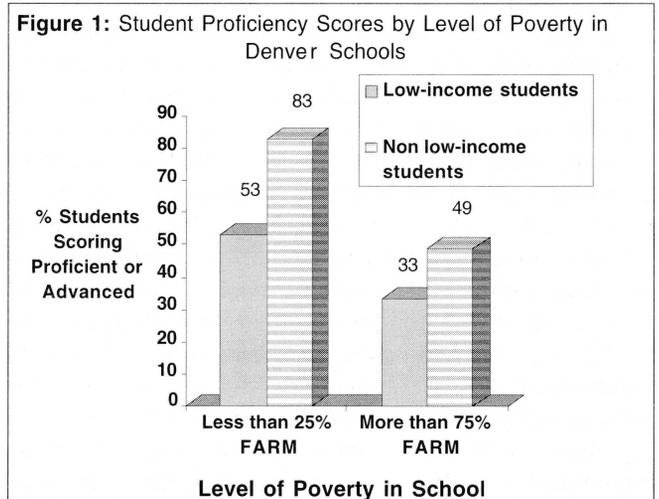
In the landmark report by sociologist James S. Coleman for the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare in 1966, Coleman stated, “It is known that socioeconomic factors bear a strong relation to academic achievement,” and “it appears that a pupil’s achievement is strongly related to the educational backgrounds and

aspirations of the other students in the school” (pp. 21-22). In conducting the study as directed by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Coleman found, “The effects of the student body environment upon a student’s achievement appear to lie in the educational proficiency possessed by that student body, whatever its racial or ethnic composition” (pp. 307-310).<sup>1</sup> The report also assessed the educational quality of the schools attended by different ethnic groups, outlining the curricula, facilities, academic practices, and teacher quality. Later efforts to desegregate schools were based on the findings of this report.

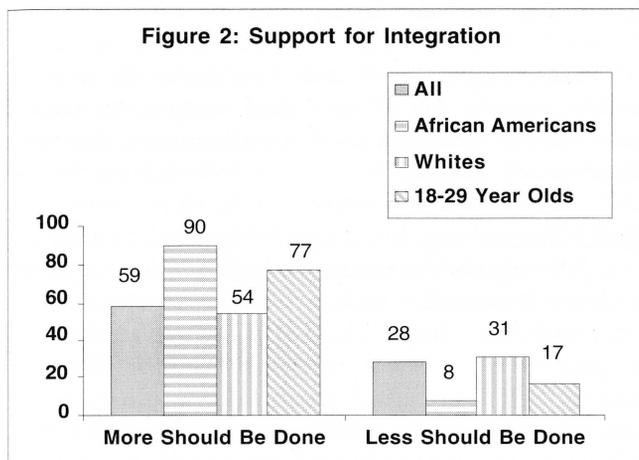
Thirty-five years later, Orfield’s study on resegregation notes, “Educational disadvantage is closely linked to poverty, both poverty of the individual student and of the school he or she attends... Latinos attend the schools with the highest levels of students poor or near poor (those who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch) followed by African Americans and Native Americans” (2001, p. 35). After declining into the 1980s, the study notes, the level of segregation is on the rise nationwide.

The increase in segregation should trouble not just those committed to equity, but those proponents of higher achievement as well. A study in 2002 by Denver’s Piton Foundation on the achievement levels of low-income students in the public schools echoes the findings of the Coleman Report and numerous reports released in the intervening years. “Low-income elementary school children in Denver perform significantly better on standardized tests” when they attend schools where fewer than half of the students are poor, according to the Foundation’s report (Gottlieb, 2002a, p. 1).

Figure 1 illustrates student proficiency on standardized tests based on the level of poverty in the Denver schools. The scores of non-low-income students “deteriorate significantly” in schools where a majority of all students qualify for free and reduced-price meals (FARM). In elementary schools where fewer than twenty-five percent of students qualified for FARM, eight-three



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percent of non-low-income students scored proficient or advanced on standardized reading tests compared to forty-nine percent in schools with more than seventy-five percent FARM-qualified students (p.2). The study also notes that “the vast majority of low-income Denver children attend high poverty neighborhood schools where, with a few notable exceptions, achievement levels are lagging” (p.1).

Between the time of the Coleman Report and the Denver study, numerous other studies offered similar findings including the three below.

A 1986 study by the Department of Education on Chapter 1 (now Title 1) determined that low-income students were nearly twice as likely (fifty percent versus twenty-eight percent) to fall into the bottom quartile of achievement in high-poverty schools versus low-poverty schools. At the same time, middle-class students attending high-poverty schools were more likely to be underachievers (thirty-seven percent) than poor students in middle-class schools (twenty-eight percent) (Kennedy, M. M., Jung, R. K., and Orland, M.E. as cited in Kahlenberg, 2001, p. 26).

A 1994 study by the Urban Institute on students living in public housing in Albuquerque, New Mexico found that “after controlling for home environment, a poor child attending a school in a neighborhood with twenty percent poverty is likely to score thirty percentile points higher than a similar child in a neighborhood school with eighty percent poverty” (Rusk, D. and Mosley, J. as cited in Kahlenberg, 2001, p.27).

A 1997 congressionally authorized study of 40,000 students found that “the poverty level of the school (over and above the economic status of an individual student) is negatively related to standardized achievement” (Puma, M. et. al. as cited in Kahlenberg, 2001, p.28).

### *Public Support for Integration*

Although schools are increasingly segregated by race, and low-income students are concentrated in high-

poverty schools, public support for integration is strong. Gallup polls in July 1999 revealed that the majority of Americans say more should be done to integrate schools. Overall, fifty-nine percent said “more should be done” versus twenty-eight percent who said “less should be done.” Figure 2 illustrates how this support is broken down by some demographic factors.

Although most Americans express support for integration, busing as a mechanism does not have broad support, especially among whites. Century Foundation senior fellow Ruy Teixeira noted, “The broadly popular goal of integration therefore will have to be obtained in some other way, probably through linkage to some other broadly popular goal. Giving parents more choices within the public school system is a logical candidate” (Teixeira, pp. 262-263). However, public school choice may not be viable in the new judicial climate if it is linked to race-specific criteria.

### *Judicial Trends in Desegregation*

School boards are facing court challenges if they use race-specific criteria for voluntary integration. A 1999 article in *School Board News*, a publication of the National School Boards Association (NSBA), noted that a series of court decisions struck down race-conscious school policies, including popular magnet programs and voluntary transfer policies. “All race-based policies are under full-scale attack,” said Harvard University’s Orfield (Stover, 1999). NSBA staff attorney Edwin Darden noted that school boards not under court-ordered desegregation orders are particularly vulnerable to this new legal environment. Maree Sneed, an attorney who helped defend two school boards against suits by white parents charging reverse discrimination agreed, saying, “School districts should take a cautious approach to voluntarily implementing any student assignment practices that may be considered to be race conscious.”

In 2002, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals “ruled that Seattle’s use of race as a factor in determining school assignments violates state Initiative 200,” which was passed in 1998 and prohibits racial preferences in public employment, education and contracting (Seattle, 2002).

To deal with the new judicial environment while not passively allowing resegregation to sweep through their school systems, school boards are considering creative alternatives. In a new publication designed to assist school boards in assessing the legal validity of their student assignment guidelines, NSBA attorney Darden wrote:

*There is a growing movement that speaks of the problem of economic segregation, and says that diversity needs to follow an economic track rather than one based on race, color, or*

*national origin.... The benefit is that such efforts avoid strict scrutiny under the U.S. Constitution, especially to the extent that the primary goal is economic diversity and racial diversity is an added benefit, though there is some risk that a court will see the district's use of poverty as a pretext for race.... These issues are still evolving, but they are important to watch (2002, p. 6).*

## **THE CASE FOR INTEGRATING SCHOOLS BY FAMILY INCOME THROUGH PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE**

Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation (formerly Twentieth-Century Fund), is a leading proponent of integrating schools by family income through public school choice, which he also refers to as economic integration and common school choice.

Kahlenberg, a proponent of affirmative action, is executive director of the foundation's Common School Task Force, conceived to "advance the discussion of how public policy can promote more economically and racially integrated public schools." He has been vocal in his attempts to alert affirmative action proponents of the long-term impacts of the judicial rulings against various desegregation methods, and voter initiatives to end affirmative action. He has encouraged his colleagues to consider new methods that can achieve results, pass judicial scrutiny, and enjoy wider public support. This section will summarize Kahlenberg's case for economic integration, primarily as set forth in his book: *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools Through Public School Choice* (2001).

Grounded in Mann's belief that education and the common school should create "productive workers, informed citizens and loyal Americans," Kahlenberg argues that segregation is the "most egregious violation of the common school idea." He believes that fairness, unity and choice are the three dominant "profoundly American" values that resonate with the public regarding public education. None of the three predominant reform strategies — vouchers, busing, or compensatory education — exhibits all three values. Economic integration through public school choice does so, he argues, and will, most importantly, boost student achievement. "Taking steps to integrate schools by economic status will significantly promote the three goals of education: to prepare workers, citizens and Americans. Economic integration of schools will raise the achievement and improve the life chances of the poor without reducing the achievement of the middle class, and it will further the secondary goal of promoting a vibrant democracy and unity amid diversity" (pp. 23-25).

## ***Kahlenberg's Four Key Factors***

Kahlenberg points to four key factors for why the socioeconomic mix of a school matters to student achievement across the board: peer influence, classroom environment, parental involvement, and teacher influence.

### Peer Influence

Peer influence is extremely high among school-age children. Studies show that middle-income students have different study habits, homework completion rates, attendance levels, discipline, school behavior, life goals, and motivation to learn than the majority of low-income students. Additionally, middle-income students are more likely to have college aspirations, and understand the research and application process. Students with these positive peer attributes that make up a majority of a given school, Kahlenberg argues, will set the tone of the school and influence all students. High-achieving students also tend to help teach other students content, including vocabulary.

Researchers on urban school districts have looked into the theory that some students eschew achievement due to the fear of "acting white." According to Kahlenberg, these studies reveal that this has more to do with class than race, stating that when controlling for race, "they find that blacks do not cut classes, miss school, or complete fewer homework assignments than whites; rather poor people of all races are more likely to cut classes, miss school and do less homework" (p. 52). Kahlenberg notes that "disadvantaged students do not, of course, have a monopoly on norms that denigrate academic achievement," but "data clearly show that high-poverty schools are more likely to breed a culture of anti-achievement."

### Classroom Environment

The classroom environment in most schools with concentrated poverty is different than those of middle-class schools. There are increased reports of vandalism, theft, threats of violence and problems with discipline. There is a higher proportion of students with special needs and slow learners, which sets a slower pace for classes. There are also higher student mobility and absence, which are disruptive to all students.

### Parental Involvement

According to Orfield, "socioeconomic status has been found to be the 'primary predictor' of parental involvement" with low-income parents significantly less involved with their children's schools (cited in Kahlenberg, p. 62). Kahlenberg argues that the concentrated lack of parental involvement in high-poverty schools matters because involvement raises student achievement in three

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ways. It helps raise the individual child's achievement through homework help and it signals to the child that his or her family values education. But most importantly for the case for economic integration, he cites studies that find that "when parents volunteer in the classroom and participate in school activities, they raise the average achievement level of all children in the school." The benefit of attending schools in which parents are involved "has been found to be particularly pronounced for low-income students" (p. 63). Additionally, active parents tend to insist on high standards, high-quality teachers and adequate funding for their schools – efforts that, if successful, benefit all students.

### Teacher Influence

Teacher quality appears to be lower in most high-poverty schools than in middle-class schools. Teacher vacancies are harder to fill in low-income schools: "teachers are less likely to be licensed, less likely to be experienced, more likely to teach out of their subject area, less likely to hold master's degrees, and less likely to score well on teacher exams." There are more substitute teachers, and higher teacher mobility. "Among the weak pool of educators, students in high-poverty schools get the weakest," and this problem may become more stark as the teacher shortage crisis increases (pp. 67-69).

As do other professionals, teachers tend to go where salaries are higher, resources are better, and they have more control over their workday – attributes generally found more frequently in middle-class schools. Kahlenberg also points to the differences in the level of challenge in the curricula and expectations in high-poverty and middle-class schools as a draw for teachers and a factor in student achievement.

### Two Strikes

Kahlenberg acknowledges that individual schools with high concentrations of poverty may succeed, and individual poor students in high-poverty schools may also excel. But there is no example of a high-performing, high-poverty school district. Poverty, per se, does not cause behaviors that undermine school achievement. However, like William Julius Wilson, Kahlenberg argues that concentrations of high-poverty and joblessness reinforce a set of behaviors that create an environment in which achievement is the exception rather than the norm (Wilson, 1996).

"A low-income kid has two strikes against him," Kahlenberg stated on a radio program about economic integration (*Diane Rehm Show*, 2002). "Being born into a low-income family is a strike against you in education" due to family resources, literacy, availability of books in the home, etc. "There is a second, independent strike:

going to school where everyone around you is poor. There's only so much that public policy can do about the first issue – you can't force parents to spend more time reading to their children.... But we can do something about the school environment...that will have some effect on their achievement."

## ONE FRAMEWORK FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In Kahlenberg's vision, no school should comprise more than fifty percent low-income students. Kahlenberg arrives at this figure through a review of the past literature on various "tipping points" causing white and middle-class black flight in housing desegregation, Title I school-wide funding, busing controversies, and public opinion polling on race and integration. Kahlenberg emphasizes that no student should attend a high-poverty school, and makes clear that he does not promote sending a handful of middle-class students to a high-poverty school simply to improve numbers.

He promotes the use of the current definition for free and reduced-price meals as an easy and non-controversial method to establish the level of poverty in a school. Specifically, he recommends using the highest cutoff, for the reduced meal, which was \$31,543 a year for a family of four in the 2000-2001 school year. This will include some lower-middle-class students as well as those in high-poverty, which he believes may help build support for the effort and also help the achievement of those middle-class students who are also often disadvantaged.

*Schools could implement the plan through boundary adjustments when schools become overcrowded or when new schools are built. "In the end, however, it is hard to achieve socioeconomic integration merely by fiddling around the edges of a system that uses mandatory school assignment based on residence" (p. 115). Instead, Kahlenberg proposes a system of controlled public school choice. Such systems are currently in place in some districts nationwide in order to improve racial integration. He believes such plans could easily be altered for economic integration.*

Kahlenberg's plan would allow accommodations to give preferences to students who live within a short walk of schools, and would permit preferences for siblings to attend the same schools. Prior to its implementation, the district should survey parents to determine the variety of school preferences (uniforms, Spanish immersion, back-to-basics, etc.), and then design public schools to meet those preferences. "Controlled choice is designed to maximize parental satisfaction," he states (p. 116). Districts should close or reconstitute schools that are undersubscribed and replicate schools that are oversubscribed.

According to Kahlenberg, majority middle-class schools can be achieved within the school districts of

eighty-six percent of schools nationwide. For those fourteen percent of districts with a majority low-income school population, he recommends a metropolitan solution through either district consolidation (which is his preference) or inter-district choice. In a hypothetical urban area, where the predominantly poor city (thirty percent middle-class and seventy percent poor families) is surrounded by more affluent suburbs of total comparable size (ninety percent middle class, ten percent poor), he argues that “all schools in the area can achieve a solid mix of sixty percent middle class if just 30 percent of the urban and suburban students agree to cross lines” (p. 133).

In these urban schools, he acknowledges the challenges of attracting middle-class students to city schools with poor reputations. He recommends a concerted effort through the following steps: improve the physical facilities of the city schools; place programs popular with suburban families in city schools; reduce class size in city schools; and encourage city schools to capitalize on the advantages of urban attractions through partnerships with museums, universities, theaters, sports teams, etc. (p. 134).

## **ECONOMIC INTEGRATION IN TWO DISTRICTS**

There is no comprehensive list of school districts that have implemented economic integration plans. A review of education literature and Century Foundation research reveals at least eleven jurisdictions that use family income to balance their student populations. These include La Crosse, Wisconsin; Manchester, Connecticut; Charlotte-Mecklenberg, North Carolina; Wake County, North Carolina; South Orange-Maplewood, New Jersey; Coweta County, Georgia; St. Lucie County, Florida; Greenville, South Carolina; Brandywine, Delaware; and the two newest districts: Cambridge, Massachusetts and San Francisco, California. While all these districts use family income in some way, not all have targets such as Kahlenberg’s proposal to ensure that no school has more than fifty percent FARM eligible students (Century Foundation, 2002, pp. 2-3).

This section will present a snapshot of the systems in place in Wake County and in San Francisco. Wake County was chosen because it is a large school district with both urban and suburban areas in which the plan has been in effect long enough to provide data on its impact. San Francisco was chosen because it is the largest urban school district (without a suburban component) to attempt such a plan.

### ***Wake County, North Carolina:***

#### Quick Facts

The Wake County Public School System serves the city of Raleigh, eleven other municipalities and all

unincorporated areas of the county. It was ranked as the twenty-seventh largest school district in the nation during the 2001-2002 school year and it currently serves more than 104,000 students from kindergarten through twelfth grade in 125 schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002a; WCPSS, n.d.).

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 62.9 percent of the students are white non-Hispanic, 28.3 percent are African American non-Hispanic, 4.6 percent are Hispanic, 3.9 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.3 percent are American Indian/Alaska Native. Just over twenty-four percent (24.2) of their students qualify for FARM (NCES, 2002b).

#### Economic Integration Plan

The Wake County region is large, with the outlying areas approximately two hours away from Raleigh by bus. As part of its efforts to desegregate by race, Wake County schools engaged in busing for twenty-five years. The county’s goal was a minority population of ten to forty-five percent in each school. As a result, the schools were less segregated by race than the national average before it began its economic integration plan, with only twenty-one percent of African American students attending majority-minority schools, compared with seventy percent nationwide (Kahlenberg, 2001, p. 252).

Anxious to maintain its academic achievement since noting that courts had been ending race-conscious desegregation programs, the district began a new plan in 2000 using two new criteria – family income and student achievement – in considering the composition of a school. The district set a goal of having no school with more than forty percent FARM students, and no more than twenty-five percent of the students performing below grade level (Vaishnav, 2002). The district also adopted guidelines to minimize travel time and maintain as much stability in assignment as possible. The board agreed to implement the policy by redrawing school boundaries and using income, rather than race, to decide school admissions. Except for its magnet schools, which are chosen by parents, the integration was achieved through assignment rather than parental choice. Because the area is growing dramatically, the district is frequently building new schools and reshuffling student assignments. The magnet schools with innovative programs that are of interest to many suburban parents are placed in the inner city of Raleigh, while the outlying suburban schools have more traditional programs.

Controversy arose in 2002 when the school board added several hundred affluent students to the busing list to help integrate some schools with continued economic imbalance. In his report for Denver’s Piton Foundation on the Wake County plan, Gottlieb noted that “parents of

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those children organized to fight the plan, and made considerably more noise than the thousands of low-income parents whose children were bused last year" (2002b, p. 3). Under political pressure from these families, the school board relented and allowed 143 affluent students to remain in their high-income school rather than be switched to a school with lower average income. "A child needs the full support that you get from a community" one parent organizing against the plan said. "You don't get that by putting your child on the bus for an hour" (Johnston, 2000). Another parent said, "Diversity by choice is a good thing. Diversity by forced busing is not" (Richard, 2002).

The Piton Foundation report states that the number of schools in the county with very low poverty (those enrolling less than fifteen percent low-income students) has increased in the previous two years from nineteen to twenty-five. The number of county schools with high poverty (exceeding the forty percent goal) increased as well –fourteen elementary and middle schools exceeded the threshold compared to eight schools at the time the new plan took effect (Gottlieb, 2002b, p. 6).

### Achievement

Wake County's website reports the following recent results. "Over the past few years, student performance in WCPSS has continued to improve while dropout rates have declined. Students posted the highest End-of-Grade scores in the district's history during the 2001-2002 school year.... Nearly ninety percent of students scored at or above grade level.

Especially significant in the 2001-2002 results was the progress made to close the achievement gap with gains being made by all groups including African-Americans, Hispanics, special education students, and students receiving free and reduced-price lunches. The percentage of students participating in the free and reduced-price lunch program that met or exceeded grade level standards rose on average 5.4 percentage points in reading and 6.0 percentage points in math across all grade levels.... The percentage of African-American students meeting or exceeding grade level standards increased 4.5 percentage points in reading and 6.0 percentage points in math. The percentage of Hispanic students scoring at or above grade level in reading and math increased at every grade level except grade 8, with an average gain of 2.4 percentage points in reading and 4.0 percentage points in math.

"SAT scores also reached their highest levels ever in 2001-2002. The average SAT score for Wake seniors in 2001-2002 was 1067, a 13-point gain from 2000-2001, and a six-point gain from the previous high score of 1061 achieved in 1999-2000. The average national score was 1020 and average North Carolina score was 998" (WCPSS, n.d.).

### *San Francisco, California*

#### Quick Facts

The San Francisco Unified School District encompasses the city and county of San Francisco, with no adjoining suburban towns. It is ranked as the sixty-second largest school district in the nation during the 2000-2001 school year, according to the NCES (2002a). It served approximately 59,000 students from kindergarten through twelfth grade in 116 schools in the 2001-2002 school year, according to its website (SFUSD, 2001, Fall). According to NCES, 50.4 percent of its students are Asian/Pacific Islander, 21.7 percent are Hispanic, 15.6 percent are African-American non-Hispanic, 11 percent are white non-Hispanic, and 0.6 percent are American Indian/Alaska Native. Just over 54 percent (54.2) of the students are eligible for FARM (2002b).

Under court order since 1983 to desegregate its schools, San Francisco had in place a system whereby no ethnic group could comprise more than forty-five percent of the student body in an individual school and each school had to contain students of at least four ethnic groups. Chinese American parents and activists filed suit against that plan, arguing successfully that it created a cap on high-achieving Chinese American students trying to get into the city's top academic high school and gave preferences to lower-achieving Latino and African American students. A federal court settlement barred San Francisco from using race as a factor in school assignments; at the same time, the city remains under court order to maintain desegregated schools (Egelko, 2002; Guthrie, 2001, March 15; Guthrie, 2001, July 12). By using socioeconomic integration, the school hopes to accomplish both these orders.

#### Economic Integration Plan

San Francisco's plan will rely on a "diversity index" to decide student assignment. It is a complicated formula to measure a school's diversity scale and an individual family's socioeconomic situation. Families will be asked about their income, welfare benefits, public housing, highest grade attended by parents, and language spoken in the home, among other factors. These factors, plus others such as student test scores, preschool experience, and academic ranking of a student's previous school, will be computed into the diversity index, which will then be used to create schools with balanced student bodies (Fletcher, 2002; Chmelynski, 2002; SFUSD, 2001, April 4).

The plan permits students and their families to make five school choices. Accommodations are made to keep siblings together and to permit students to attend schools close to home if they are not already oversubscribed.

Achievement

Unlike Wake County, the plan in San Francisco has just begun its implementation. Therefore, there is no achievement record to report. Because it is a large urban district without suburbs to use in rebalancing schools, the success or failure of this program will be closely monitored to assess the use of this reform in large urban districts.

**STAKEHOLDER RESPONSE TO ECONOMIC INTEGRATION**

Although the concept is a relatively new one, it is not too early to review the support for and opposition to economic integration, and to consider how philosophies and core principals of major actors may affect the future success of this comprehensive reform.

*School-based Associations & School Officials*

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and the National School Boards Association (NSBA) have all voiced interest in and some level of support for the concept of economic integration (Century Foundation, 2000a; No More Poor, 2001; Chmelynski, 2002). An AFT official enthusiastically embraced the proposal, saying, "It balances public purposes with private choices, community with liberty.... It takes account of just about every bit of solid knowledge we have about schooling and yet rejects social engineering (in fact, it undoes a lot of social engineering such as school redlining and gross inequities in funding), relying instead on choice and incentives.... It levels up rather than down, and it helps our most vulnerable children without harming – indeed, by benefiting – children who were lucky enough to be born to more propitious circumstances" (Century Foundation, 2000a.). However, the comments from a NSBA official were more cautious, noting that the plan would likely be successful in those districts with a large proportion of middle-class students, rather than urban and rural districts with high levels of poverty (Chmelynski, 2002).

One school leader in the center of the reform debate over school vouchers had a different view. Barbara Byrd-Bennet, CEO of the Cleveland Municipal School District, argued that there might not be "an equation between diversity and student achievement" and disagreed that a trend toward resegregation was necessarily a problem needing a solution (Cobb, 2002).

*Conservative Organizations/  
Those Generally Opposed to Affirmative Action*

Those organizations that oppose affirmative action have responded to the idea with neutral to negative

opinions. The chief executive of the Center for Individual Rights, a legal group that has challenged affirmative action, said about San Francisco's plan, "I think it is hard to generalize about these plans. Unless there is some evidence of race being a motivation or a hidden factor, legally we see nothing wrong with this approach" (Fletcher, 2002). In an online dialogue about the concept sponsored by the Century Foundation, the vice president for the Center for Equal Opportunity said, "I think there are still many positive features to the idea. The more voluntary, the better." But he also argued that if the proposal sought to achieve racial balance, it would be illegal (2000a).

Expressing opposition, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute said, "Instead of moving kids around...parents should, in fact, be able to send their kids to neighborhood schools or other schools on a space-available basis. And the solution to low scores is simply teaching the kids, not moving them around like pieces on a chess board" (*Early Show*, 2002).

*Liberal Organizations/  
Those Who Support Affirmative Action*

The organizations that have traditionally led the fight to desegregate the nation's schools – the NAACP and the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDEF) – do not embrace and champion economic integration. While Dennis Parker, assistant counsel of the NAACP LDEF, is on the board of Kahlenberg's Common School Task Force, the LDEF associate director-counsel offered faint praise for it on the Diane Rehm radio program in 2002. He acknowledged that concentrations of poverty in schools lead to problems in education, and said that the San Francisco plan seemed like "a good idea, let's see how it works." But he disagreed that family income should supplant race as a consideration in integration. Additionally, the NAACP Call for Action in Education issued in 2001 does not recommend the consideration or implementation of economic integration among its multi-point plan (NAACP Education Department, n.d).

In an online forum on the topic sponsored by the Century Foundation, Harvard University professor Gary Orfield agreed that "economically integrated schools are much better than economically segregated schools" but also asserted that "poverty is not the same as race." Like the NAACP, he said that because race is still an important factor in this nation, direct racial integration "is a better and more sustainable policy" (2000a). Additionally, Orfield identified a "high level of suburban segregation reported for African American and Latino students" in his report on school resegregation (2001), which acknowledges that the inner ring suburbs surrounding urban areas have

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increased in racial diversity and in the proportion of low-income families. Given this fact, Kahlenberg's notion that a consolidated urban/suburban school district could create majority middle-class schools may be unrealistic now and even less so as this trend continues into the future. Notably, Orfield's own recommendations in his study to counter the "consequences of a decade of resegregation" do not include the concept of economic integration.

### *Other Voices*

Some opposition has arisen in many jurisdictions where the plan has been implemented. A common complaint is the distance that children must travel to schools outside their own neighborhood and the sense that some children were pawns in a policy experiment (Gottlieb, 2002b, p. 3; Plank, 2000; Richard, 2002; Sealey, 2002).

In their book on building civic capacity, Stone et. al. find that the "drive to achieve desegregation seems largely spent." While noting that "sensitivities to the socioeconomic composition of student bodies have become more prominent," the authors dismiss economic integration as a viable reform:

*...social class integration was never a policy goal and it remains largely off the education agenda.... The ability of middle-income parents to practice the exit option, either by moving to another jurisdiction or placing their children in private schools, stands as an imposing barrier to any effort toward bringing the social classes together in the classroom (p. 39).*

Scholars Van Dempsey and George Noblit, who conducted an oral history on the "cultural ignorance" evident in racial desegregation efforts say, "Whites and the courts assumed that African Americans would benefit from merely associating with the dominant culture and would assume more desirable status and beliefs.... School desegregation in many ways ignored the possibility that there could be desirable elements in African American culture worthy of maintenance and celebration" (Dempsey, 1996, pp. 115-116). Similar arguments may rise against economic integration and its potential impact on high poverty neighborhoods.

### **CONCLUSION**

Integrating schools by family income is a bold proposal at a key moment in education history. The courts and voter initiatives are closing the door on numerous methods of desegregating schools by race; mobility patterns have spread varied racial, ethnic, and income groups wider into the suburbs; and political leaders and the public continue to name education reform as a top priority. While the limited supply of private schools ensures that voucher plans offer little hope for

widespread impact – even if implemented – economic integration could have a transformative effect.

Research linking student achievement to both family income and the income level of the school is widespread and persuasive. That middle-class schools have higher achievement levels is both proven and commonly understood by parents and policy makers. Devising a plan to configure majority middle-class schools within school districts, through the use of controlled public school choice, offers elements that both conservative and liberal education advocates may find appealing. If implemented properly, such a plan could have a net effect of improving student achievement while also enhancing equity by class. It could, indeed, make true the ideal of the common school as originally envisioned by Horace Mann.

There may exist a new political opening for such a plan. Richard Kahlenberg believes that two events may generate more attention to the issue in the coming years (personal communication, February 8, 2003). During its 2002-2003 session, the U.S. Supreme Court will rule on the University of Michigan Law School's use of race as one factor in its admissions decisions. If the court rules against the policy, whether broadly or narrowly, then education leaders will likely consider alternative proposals for ensuring equity. At the same time, schools will be implementing the new requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. According to Kahlenberg, these efforts may reveal lagging achievement in schools with concentrated poverty. Both of these events may increase interest in the idea of using family income to integrate schools.

At the same time, the very boldness of the plan makes it appear politically untenable. It faces many of the same critiques that integration and busing faced. Meanwhile, most of the school districts that have implemented the plan are small, with low levels of very poor and minority students, compared to the most disadvantaged urban districts. There is not a broad track record on which to base a campaign for implementation.

While conservative critics are to date somewhat muted in their opposition to this plan, this may be because it has little political momentum and is neither in the center of the debate – nor the crosshairs of critique. Economic integration has not drawn any vocal African American proponents, which points to the lack of passion for the proposal among those plotting strategy as the courts dismantle desegregation as it has existed.

New school districts may embrace variations of economic integration in the future. This is especially likely if San Francisco and Cambridge post student achievement improvements. Given the political hurdles to implementation and the lack of passionate advocates across the political spectrum, economic integration must overcome many obstacles before it can rise to the top of the national education agenda.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Since its release, many advocates have used the Coleman Report to challenge increased school funding or new programs for the disadvantaged, arguing that low achievement is caused by home environment and therefore cannot be solved by the schools. However, Coleman himself repudiated this broad conclusion and use of his report, according to an account by David S. Seeley, the assistant U.S. commissioner of education at the time of the release of the Coleman Report (2002).

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