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Diversity or Achievement, Why Can't We Choose Both

By: [Ann McColl](#)

OPED

North Carolina is becoming increasingly racially and ethnically diverse. That's a fact. Our public schools can capitalize on this diversity or can go back to the segregation patterns that existed 50 years ago. That's a choice.

Population trends, school segregation patterns, and a United States Supreme Court opinion have converged in a way that calls upon us to consider the goals of diversity in public schools. This issue is especially timely as we approach the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the unanimous opinion by the Supreme Court that ended the separate but equal doctrine and required integration in schools.

North Carolina's growing population is becoming increasingly diverse, including a roughly 400 percent increase in the Hispanic population in just 10 years. This diversity is reflected in the public schools where four of every 10 students are of minority race or ethnicity.

While diversity has been increasing, North Carolina's schools are becoming more segregated. This is occurring at the school level and in some upper grade classrooms. Resegregation is also evident in the increased number of minority students attending racially isolated schools. A recent study of North Carolina schools by Duke University professors found a substantial increase over just a five year period in the percentage of "nonwhite" students attending schools with "nonwhite" populations of 90-100 percent. There were particularly large increases in the coastal region (3.0 percent to 11.8 percent) and in some of the large school districts, notably Winston-Salem/Forsyth (from 0 to 20 percent) and Charlotte-Mecklenburg (from 2.2 percent to 6.9 percent).

Although residential segregation is the main cause for school segregation, it is not the basis for the trend towards resegregation of our schools. In fact, residential segregation has decreased in North Carolina from 1990 to 2000.

With an increase in diversity and a decrease in residential segregation, how have our schools become more segregated? Part of the answer is in the convoluted history of school desegregation lawsuits. In the post-*Brown* era, courts enforced integration plans in order to correct segregation that was required or sanctioned by law. Schools became fairly integrated under these court orders. But as residential patterns continued to cause school segregation, courts became reluctant to require schools to fix issues not related to the unlawful segregation. While not required, many communities chose to pursue diversity in schools on the premise in *Brown* that separate schools were inherently unequal. These voluntary strategies faltered in the 1990s when courts, including those with jurisdiction over North Carolina, struck down such race-conscious plans without even determining whether diversity was a

compelling interest of schools.

While the legal basis for integration was unraveling, student achievement became the dominant feature of education reform. Expectations for parental options, such as the ability to choose a charter school or a magnet school have also increased. With state-mandated accountability and local pressure to respond to these initiatives, integration strategies were sometimes neglected or even intentionally derailed as no longer important or as perceived barriers to these other reforms.

This past summer, the Supreme Court declared that the educational benefits of diversity justified taking race and other measures of diversity into account in admission decisions at the University of Michigan Law School. It is hardly a stretch to apply the educational benefits of diversity at the law school to public schools. For example, the Supreme Court recognized the value of a diverse student body for breaking down racial stereotypes, making classroom discussion livelier and more enlightening, and for providing students with exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, and viewpoints so that they can be better prepared for the global economy, workplaces, the military and society.

For public schools, the Supreme Court opinion reopens the door for considering diversity. It is not a legal requirement, but a choice made by local boards with their community. How we frame this choice is critical. It cannot be an "either or" choice: either diversity or student achievement; either diversity or parental options. Rather, it should be whether to pursue the educational benefits of diversity in order to bring together these important initiatives.

Some communities may not be ready to revisit this issue. The wounds of past battles and racial divisions may be too raw. The student assignment plan may be too new. For communities that are ready to reverse trends towards resegregation, they will need to define diversity, identify its educational benefits, and develop particular strategies that meet Supreme Court criteria and best incorporate their other educational goals. While this may take some time, wouldn't it be fitting to be able to answer whether we are committed to the importance of diversity in time for the celebration of Brown in 2004?

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