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Socioeconomic Integration from an Equity Perspective

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Public education's mission is universal. The purpose of public education is to be the nation's commons where all students are invited to learn, develop their talents, and acquire the dispositions essential to a secure and thriving democratic public culture. Equity is built into the DNA of public education. And yet too often public schools fall short of this fundamental vision. Too many school districts are divided by class, race, language, culture, or religion.

In order to fulfill the essential promise of public education, 100 public school districts and charter schools across the United States have taken conscious efforts to overcome residential segregation by class, race, and/or language so that children from all economic and racial backgrounds can benefit from learning together. Those plans for "socioeconomic

integration" seek to bring about the benefits of economic and racial diversity without running afoul of legal requirements that limit the use of race in student assignment.

This paper seeks to provide a current overview of socioeconomic school integration and provide a new conceptualization of socioeconomic integration from an equity perspective. What does socioeconomic integration involve? How can it be made to work well within schools to benefit all students? The paper draws upon the insights of a day-long conference of educators, researchers, policymakers, civil rights activists, and staff of the nation's four federally-funded Equity Assistance Centers, sponsored by the Center for Education Equity (CEE) at MAEC in Washington D.C. earlier this year.

I. What is Socioeconomic School Integration?



Socioeconomic (SES) school integration is a public policy designed to improve opportunities for students by: 1) reducing the negative educational effects associated with school poverty concentrations, and 2) providing a diverse environment that benefits all students.

In 1996, only two school districts, educating 30,000 students, took conscious steps to educate rich and poor in common schools. Today, 100 school districts and charter school chains in 32 states have adopted socioeconomic integration policies. These public schools educate 4.4 million students (Kahlenberg, 2016; Potter & Quick, 2016).

School districts promote socioeconomic diversity in schools in various ways. Some change attendance boundaries to ensure a healthier economic mix of

students. Some weigh economic status as a factor in magnet school admissions. Some allow student transfers between schools only when they contribute to socioeconomic diversity. Some use “controlled choice” policies which allow families to choose from a variety of options and honor choices with an eye to promoting socioeconomic diversity.

To promote sustainable socioeconomic diversity, school districts must create criteria for defining economic advantage and disadvantage. Many districts rely on a student’s eligibility for free or reduced price lunch (185% of the poverty line). Other districts use Census data, such as education level, income, proportion of single parent households, proportion of non-English speaking residents, and proportion of homeowners in a neighborhood, to categorize students. Whatever the mechanics employed in defining socioeconomic status or the means used to create socioeconomically integrated schools, district officials pursuing these policies believe all children will learn more in diverse environments.

II. Why is Socioeconomic Integration Important?



School districts adopt socioeconomic integration policies to avoid the negative effects of segregation and to garner the positive benefits of educating students in a diverse student environment. Economic integration policies combined with equitable practices can promote social mobility by helping students gain academic and social skills. Integration policies can promote social cohesion in our multiracial democracy by teaching students of different backgrounds how to get along with and appreciate one another.

▪ **Social Mobility and Academic Skills**

Fifty years ago, the congressionally authorized Coleman Report found that the single most important predictor of academic achievement is a child's socioeconomic status. The second most important predictor is the

socioeconomic makeup of the child's school. While high-poverty schools may occasionally excel, it is extremely uncommon. Douglas Harris of Tulane University has found that majority middle-class schools are 22 times as likely to be consistently high performing as majority low-income schools (Harris, 2007). Harris defines middle-class schools as those with fewer than 50 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and low-income schools as those with 50 percent or more of students eligible for subsidized lunch.

Students in middle-class schools perform better in part because middle-class students usually have greater home advantages, such as access to food, housing, and health care. These advantages are connected with higher academic achievement. Conversely, concentrated poverty can hinder achievement. The 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test given to fourth graders showed low-income students attending more affluent schools scored substantially higher on math than low-income students attending high-poverty schools. The gap in their average scores equates to almost two years of learning (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006).

Moreover, low-income students who attended more affluent schools performed more than half a year better, on average, than middle-income students who attended high-poverty schools. Careful studies that controlled for “self-selection bias” also found strong benefits to attending economically-integrated over high-poverty schools (The Century Foundation, 2016). Indeed, a growing body of literature reveals that socioeconomically integrated schools have greater academic achievement results than homogenous schools in terms of receptive language, expressive language, and math (Reid, 2012, Perry & McConney, 2010, Saatcioglu, 2010, Orfield, 2001 & Palardy, 2013).

- **Social Cohesion and an Appreciation for Diversity**

While American public schools are charged with raising academic achievement and promoting social mobility, they are also expected to promote an American identity, social cohesion, and democratic citizenship. In an increasingly diverse nation, public schools demonstrate and expose to students what they have in common as Americans. Segregation by race, ethnicity, and class undercuts that goal by increasing the risk of students having discriminatory attitudes and prejudices.

For instance, children are at risk of developing stereotypes about racial groups if they live in and are educated in racially isolated settings. Diverse schools, by contrast, can help prevent bias and counter stereotypes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). When school settings include students from multiple racial groups, students become more comfortable with people of other races. This interaction dramatically decreases discriminatory attitudes and prejudices (McGlothlin & Killen, 2005; Rutland, Cameron, Bennett & Ferrell, 2005).

Numerous studies validate that racial integration in public schools cultivates tolerant adults and good citizens (Wells & Crain, 1994). As Justice Thurgood Marshall noted, “Unless our children begin to learn together, then there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together” (Milliken v. Bradley, 1974). These effects continue after high school. Research confirms that students who attend racially diverse high schools are more likely to live in diverse neighborhoods five years after graduation (Phillips, Rodosky, Muñoz & Larsen, 2009).

Extensive research demonstrates that a school’s student body composition has a measurable effect on achievement

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(Borman & Dowling, 2010; Buttaro, Catsambis, Mulkey & Steelman, 2010; Cookson, 2013)? Among the many positive effects, scholars point to positive peer influence, family engagement, teacher expectations, amount of homework, number of advanced classes, and the degree of school safety (Kahlenberg, 2012; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Data on school districts using socioeconomic school integration confirm research findings. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, for example, each school has a distinctive theme or teaching approach. Families rank their preferences among schools and the school district honors choice with a goal of ensuring schools have a mix of rich and poor students. This effort helps forge both social cohesion and social mobility. In Cambridge, 84 percent of low-income students in 2014 graduated in four years, compared with 65 percent of low-income students in nearby Boston. Likewise, 83 percent of Black students in Cambridge graduated — a rate 17 points higher than Black students in Boston (Kahlenberg, 2015).

Genuine socioeconomic integration and equity requires a deep understanding of what makes a great and equitable school and classroom regardless of the

background of the students. It does not happen through awkward pronouncements or “siloes” interventions. Schools and school districts that engage in “siloes” and over-simplified analysis will develop policies and practices that fail to address the complexity of creating academically and socially successful socioeconomic learning environments.

III. Moving Forward: How Can Socioeconomic Integration Be Implemented Within Schools To Ensure Equity? Five Practical Steps



While a growing body of literature demonstrates that socioeconomic integration does increase greater academic achievement, understanding the interactive effects of students, schools, families, and communities have yet to be fully explored. In addition, the assumption that socioeconomic diversity alone is the solution for ensuring all children succeed academically and socially raises

important questions about the specific needs of English learners, African American, Latino, and American Indian students. This is particularly true when it comes to the central importance of race in determining disparities. To fully understand the complex interactions of race and other student characteristics, including socioeconomic status, a more complex framework is needed to fully embrace diversity and equity and to ensure that the benefits of socioeconomic diversity can fully be accomplished.

What are the principles and practices that can turn the ideal of equitable socioeconomic integration into a living reality? What does socioeconomic integration look like at the school and classroom level? And what can educators do to ensure that socioeconomic integration results in safe, joyous learning environments for all children? Below is a series of specific steps for helping to ensure that equitable socioeconomic integration becomes a reality.

Step One: Adhere to and Internalize Basic Principles

The first step is a commitment to some basic principles including:

- **A school's overall framework should be based on a co-constructed approach between schools, diverse families, and communities where all cultures are elevated and respected.** Differences in culture and language should be seen as assets and funds of knowledge. Using an equity-centered model, families and students from diverse backgrounds have an equal voice.
- **Policies and practices should be aligned with specific needs of students.** While the research indicates that students of diverse backgrounds benefit from socioeconomic integration, program offerings must be aligned to effectively teach and assess diverse students, including English Learners, African American, Latino children, and other populations whose academic achievement needs to be addressed to reduce and/or eliminate the achievement gap.
- **School leaders must set the tone and demonstrate consistent commitment to equity and socioeconomic integration.** Leadership is essential to the success of socioeconomic integration and equity. Successful school leadership requires both modeling and implementing equitable practices. On-going supervision, continuous assessment of needs and

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progress, and working in partnership with teachers and parents are key in effectively meeting overall goals. Teachers need embedded professional learning opportunities to empower them to act as agents of change. On-going culturally competent professional development enables teachers to learn skills and receive support as needed.

- **Communication with families, community, and the public is essential from the very beginning of this transformation.** Families play an essential role for socioeconomic integration to be an effective tool for academic achievement and socio-emotional wellbeing. When families feel welcomed and are shared decision-makers regarding their child's learning, they are more likely to fully participate with educators to develop a strong foundation for sustainability and success.

The principles and practices that create a positive learning environment in any school apply to schools that have the courage to integrate themselves socio-economically. Schools are small societies. Turning the possible tensions that can result from the interactions of many personalities into positive and productive possibilities and opportunities requires leadership,

asset-based approaches, planning, inclusion, transparency, teamwork, caring relationships, authentic family and community engagement, and shared benchmarks of success.

Step Two: Implement a Suite of Socioeconomic Integration “Equity Tools”

No two districts are like, no two schools are alike, and no two classrooms are alike. But that said, there are “Equity Tools” that work in many settings. Here are a few ideas that have proven to be successful.

- **Implement Policies and Practices that Open Pathways to Academic Excellence for All Students:** Integrate pre-requisites for academic learning. With this support, teachers can: set achievement targets prior to instruction and make these evident to students; provide students constructive feedback that is non-judgmental and linked explicitly to the goals for learning; make appropriate instructional adjustments responsive to the assessment data gleaned; and increase students' capacity for self-assessment.
- **Revise Out-dated Curriculum:** Building on the strengths of diversity, inclusion, and equity, 21st century

curriculum needs to emphasize deep learning, collective effort, reflection, and a lasting respect for others. Students should graduate with understanding and appreciation of the struggle for human freedom, the power of reason, the beauty of human expression, and the clarity of numbers.

- **Redesign Classroom Environments:** Too many of our classrooms are still stuck in the 19th century, despite whiteboards and computers. Today's digital learners require a new kind of learning environment. One of the surest ways to promote genuine socioeconomic integration is to provide 21st century classrooms.
- **End Rigid Tracking:** Segregating students into different tracks often effectively segregates students by race and class. This divides students and works against positive school climates, promoting the myth that some students are more special than others.
- **Situate Learning in the Lives of Students and Their Families:** Teachers should include culturally competent and sustaining elements in all aspects of schooling. Culturally sustaining educators build upon the cultural fluidity and connectedness reflected in the identities of students as an asset to learning and academic

achievement. They seek to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the fabric of schooling.

- **Invest in Embedded Professional Learning Opportunities:** Professional learning opportunities must include cultural competency training. Equitable socioeconomic integration requires embedded and ongoing professional development. Without professional learning in cultural competence, performance disparities for low-income students and students of color will continue. It takes real and deep learning to understand the what, why, and how of committing to a student assignment policy that is new and will be at times controversial and challenging.
- **Engage Families and Community Members as Partners:** Equity educators advocate for high quality teacher preparation in the context of culturally competent and sustainable integrated schools. Connections with parents and the community at large will facilitate attainment of collaborative partnerships that promote the academic, social, and emotional development of children.
- **Establish Family Information Centers:** Families need regular, consistent, and understandable information, not only about their

child's progress, but why the district and school is promoting socioeconomic integration so that it benefits all students. Families should be engaged from the very beginning of this transformation.

Taken together, these changes can provide fresh and dynamic learning environments for all students. When students are engaged and active, discipline problems diminish and learning increases. These "Equity Tools" represent some structural changes that lead to healthier, more engaging and equitable educational opportunities for all children.

Step Three: Understand Student Assets and Address Student Needs

At the heart of a great school and classroom is a passionate commitment to learning. We know a good deal about how learning takes place through the convergence of individual, biological, contextual, cultural, and historical factors. Any effort to raise the level of awareness and professionalism about the learning benefits associated with equitable socioeconomic integration would treat as foundational what we know about brain development, attachment, self-regulation, individuality and learning including cognitive load,

the limits of working memory and metacognition.

Students, especially vulnerable students, come to school carrying with them many stressors. Research has consistently shown that schools that take seriously the socio-emotional development of students create learning environments that lead to a sense of safety and acceptance, increase motivation to learn, and are more likely to be culturally responsive and competent.

But this is only half the picture. Vulnerable and low-income students also bring with them many unique assets that are treasures and enrich any school and classroom. They have funds of knowledge that open new vistas of learning for all students. Nationally recognized researcher, Eugene Garcia, provides the following example:

When a child comes to school for the first time he/she comes with a little suitcase full of experiences (language & culture) that he/she had before coming to school. The teacher can then say: Welcome, let's open that little suitcase and see what you have so you can share and we can learn from you or say: This is your suitcase and it is your past. Now you can forget about it and learn new things. What you have is not useful now.

Learning environments that open students' little suitcases of knowledge share certain characteristics including: personalizing and differentiating learning by addressing individuality and difference; addressing the different stages of learning; distinguishing between and addressing short-and long term-learning goals; and ensuring that these goals over time are rigorous, paced appropriately to reach annual goals, and prepare students for college and career success.

Step Four: Build a Positive School Culture That Includes Family and Community

Positive school culture is the glue that holds a school together and is an indispensable ingredient to an equitable socioeconomic integration design. The elements that contribute to a positive school culture include: a safe and supportive environment, effective school leadership, culturally responsive pedagogy and practice, high quality teachers, rigorous instruction, numerous extracurricular activities, staff collaboration, trust, and college and career readiness. And the bedrock quality of a positive school culture is the inclusion of family and community. Community is a big concept; inclusion means everyone.

Creating a positive school culture requires leadership, relationship-building, trust, and commitment to academic excellence. The commitment to building a positive and empowering school culture is vital as schools and classrooms are integrated socio-economically. These schools must confront and overcome systemic racism, the effects of concentrated poverty, and segregated schools in addition to the regular challenges facing all schools such as creating and maintaining a rigorous and vigorous academic climate, a safe and supportive cultural and physical environment, and ensuring the school's vision is infused in all aspects of its organization and mission.

Building a strong school and classroom culture is not magic. We know there are certain policies and practices which increase learning for all students and promote inclusive and supportive school cultures. If we are to address the intersectionality of socioeconomic status, race, gender, national origin, and religion, we need systemic and transformational reforms to prevail over business as usual.

Step Five: Promote Reflection and Self-Assessment

The socio-economic integration of

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schools will take time and will no doubt grow through trial and error. We are used to the concept that students should be regularly assessed about their academic progress. What we are less accustomed to is the idea that adults should reflect on their practices and adjust them according to what is working and what is not. Adults in the school must believe or come to believe that it is possible to provide an equitable learning environment and work relentlessly to remove barriers to this socioeconomic integration. Equity is not easy to achieve in part because the

definition of equity itself evolves as efforts to implement policies and practices unfold.

Purposeful organizational and cultural evolution that is inclusive and inviting opens up the possibility that difference will be embraced naturally and with a minimum of conflict. By embracing diversity and, by recognizing the worth of all people, schools can change from the inside-out in a genuine organic way and help recapture the foundational purpose of public education.

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