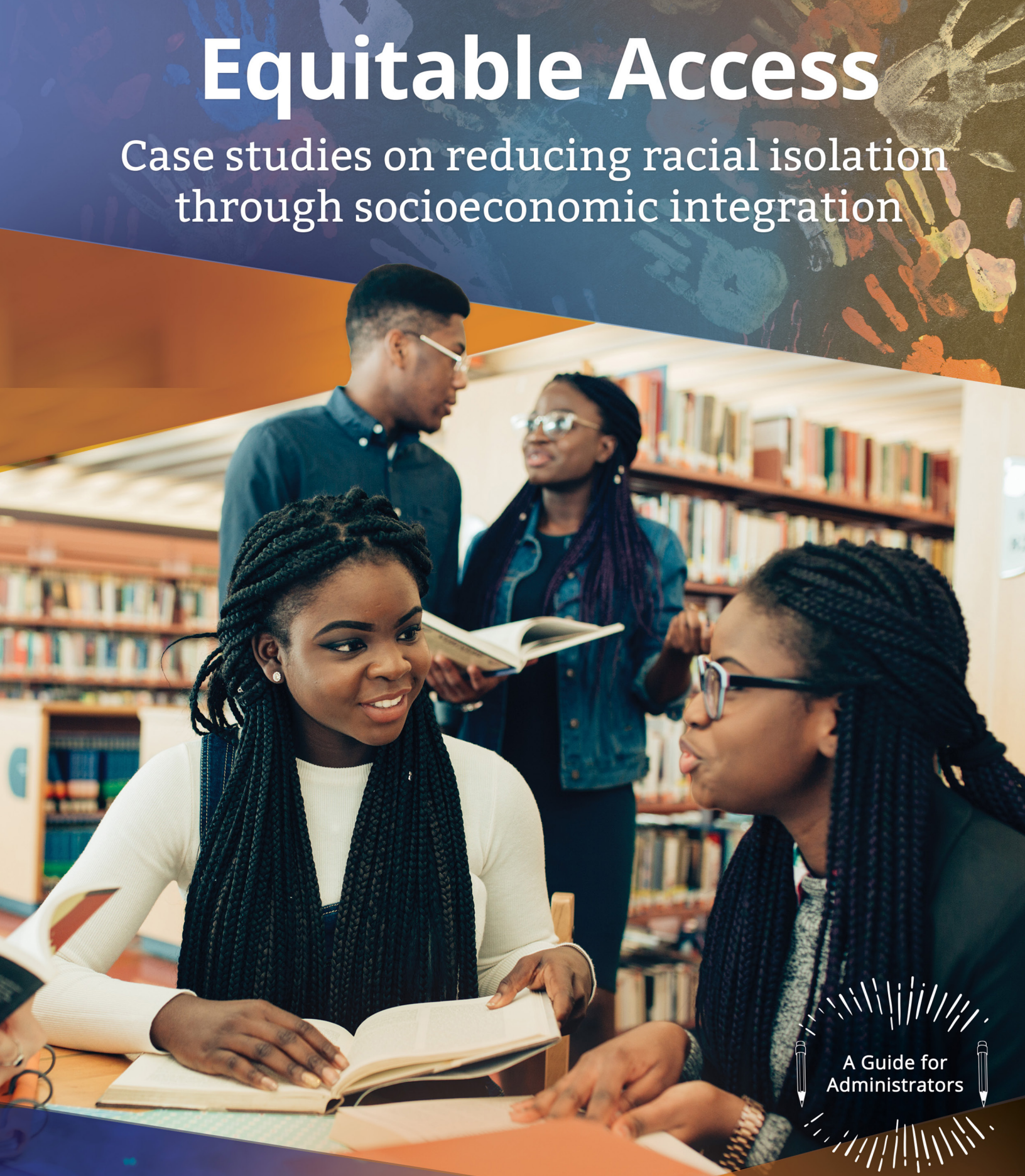
Equitable Access

Case studies on reducing racial isolation through socioeconomic integration



A Guide for Administrators

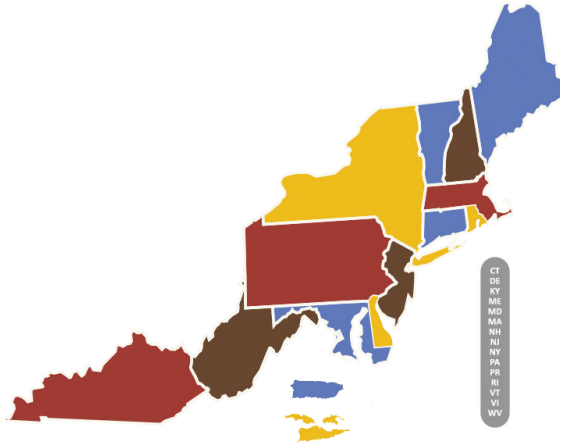
MAEC | Center *for* Education Equity

About MAEC

MAEC is an education non-profit dedicated to increasing access to a high-quality education for racially, culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse learners. We work to promote excellence and equity in education to achieve social justice.

About CEE

MAEC established the Center for Education Equity (CEE) to address problems in public schools caused by segregation and inequities. As the Region I equity assistance center, CEE works to improve and sustain the systemic capacity of public education to increase outcomes for students regardless of race, gender, religion, and national origin. CEE is funded by the US Department of Education under Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.



Authorship

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Disclaimer

MAEC is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this guide were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

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Introduction

A 2016 study by Owens, Reardon, and Jencks found a 40% increase in income segregation among students in public education from 1991 to 2012. Their research also found significant achievement gaps between Black and Latinx students and their White peers and between students from low-income and more affluent households. School-level poverty is an indicator of the quality of schooling a student will receive. A report by the Government Accountability Office stated that in 2013–14, more than one in six students in the United States attended segregated schools where most of their schoolmates were also living in poverty and were Black or Latinx.

Schools with the majority of their student populations consisting of students living in high poverty and those where the majority are students of color tend to face similar challenges. Douglas Harris explains in his 2006 report that only 1.1% of high-poverty schools consistently were high-performing compared to 24.2% of low-poverty schools. Students in high-poverty schools are more likely to be taught by early career teachers, have less access to academic supports and critical classes for college readiness, fewer college counselors, and experience less rigor and expectation for student growth. High-poverty schools also have high teacher turnover rates. Many students living in poverty also face community-level challenges such as high rates of violence, food scarcity, and increased environmental pollution that affect their academic experience.

After the 1954 and 1964 Brown decisions, schools made tremendous strides to desegregate. But, as schools were integrating, communities were resegregating. Multiple waves of White flight from more integrated urban areas helped kick off a resegregation of public schools. More recent gentrification in large urban centers has left communities more segregated than ever. High numbers of Latinx and Black residents live in high poverty, exacerbated by sharp increases in urban home costs. New White and higher-income urban residents send their children to private schools and the "best" of the public schools (typically magnet and charter schools).

In addition to these factors, the 2007 Supreme Court decision in Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No.1 added to the complexities of integration for school systems. The court determined that schools should achieve racial integration, but their integration policies should not depend on student race or ethnicity. Since this ruling, and without mandated desegregation orders, districts have struggled to define and adopt integration policies that do not rely on race or ethnicity but effectively integrate schools.

In 2011, the Obama Administration offered guidance "[that] addresses the degree of flexibility that school districts have to take proactive steps, in a manner consistent with principles articulated in Supreme Court opinions" (U.S. Departments of Justice & Education, 2011). The guidance gave examples of both race-neutral and generalized race-based strategies. In 2018, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education rescinded the 2011 guidance prioritizing race-neutral student assignment policies.

Integration options for school districts

The 2007 Supreme Court decision offered guidance about how school districts can "reduce racial isolation" without using students' race as the sole consideration for school integration. The Supreme Court permits that a student's race can only be one of many factors considered to reduce racial isolation. As a result, school districts have adopted, blended, and even adapted strategies to account for shifts in local demographics. The following sections describe two common strategies.

Rezoning/Re-districting

Traditional attendance zone boundaries indicate that students attend the schools closest to their neighborhoods. Some districts' rezoning practices recreate neighborhood segregation, especially when demographics shift due to gentrification, reinforcing existing school segregation. Since the 2007 Supreme Court decision, school districts have found it more difficult to identify factors to define and move school board zone boundaries that create school integration.

Under these circumstances, school districts have identified several student and neighborhood-level socioeconomic indicators to map attendance zone boundaries to promote diversity, such as resident education levels, homeownership rates, household income levels, etc.

Equitable or Controlled Choice

The most commonly used strategy, choice programs, are designed to give parents more school options. Districts have implemented a range of choice options beyond the limiting traditional neighborhood schools.

Charter Schools: Charter schools allow parents to select from a set of independently operated schools that offer a theme-based curricular focus. The independent authority of charter schools can be appealing to parents looking for options that will meet their child's specific needs. Charters often use a lottery system to address the high number of applications for limited availability. These lottery processes can be designed to address school integration priorities.

Magnet Schools: Magnets began in the late 1960s as a school desegregation strategy in which student eligibility is not dependent on one's address. Magnets are typically theme-based, offering students opportunities to immerse themselves in subject areas and related content. Many magnet schools manage their application process with highly selective criteria considering student grades, parent advocacy, parent engagement, student behavior, etc. Districts using this strategy should review their admission process with equitable access criteria.

Student Transfers: Transfer policies offer parents the option to request that their children move into and out of specific schools. Districts can permit across-district or within-district transfers. Transfer requests are determined by a set of considerations that support district-wide, regional, and school-level integration plans. Considerations include socioeconomic status, English proficiency, special education enrollment, gifted and talented status, and race and ethnicity.

About the profiles

This brief provides four examples of district socioeconomic integration efforts. Although the 2007 Supreme Court decision has inspired some recent district efforts, others have long histories of pursuing school desegregation. The districts seek to increase equitable access to quality education for all students. The four examples present different strategies and varying levels of success. All of them continue to revisit their plans annually.

The authors compiled these profiles using publicly available data and, in some instances, interviews with district leaders. Each district is at a different point in its socioeconomic integration journey. These districts were selected because they initiated or redesigned their socioeconomic integration efforts to address equitable access to educational opportunities. They determined the appropriate socioeconomic integration strategies for their local contexts by collecting and analyzing a range of school, district, and community-level data; engaged with families in the design, planning, and implementation of their plans; and monitored their progress on their original goals over time.

The profiles include the following districts:

- Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (North Carolina)
- District 15 (New York City)
- San Antonio Independent School District (Texas)
- Jefferson County Public Schools (Kentucky)

This collection of profiles offers some important considerations and best practices:

Prepare

- Take time to understand your context (especially over time) and establish a compelling vision.
- Engage families and the broader community by communicating clearly, broadly, and often.

Plan

- Analyze segregation using a range of data to inform the planning and designing process.
- Design an action plan to promote integration.

Implement

- Commit to a theory of action and revisit over time.
- Create structures to review progress, identify problems, and adjust the theory of action as needed.

Each profile contains elements from MAEC's Advancing Racial and Socioeconomic Diversity Playbook, which provides actions or "plays" to stakeholders interested in pursuing integration policies, as well as corresponding pitfalls to avoid. The playbook can be used as a complement to these profiles, offering a broader set of tools to achieve equity. Taken together, these resources can inform, support, and encourage school communities that wish to launch or revisit a socioeconomic integration effort.