



A SHARED FUTURE

Fostering Communities of
Inclusion in an Era of Inequality

Addressing the Patterns of Resegregation in Urban and Suburban Contexts: How to Stabilize Integrated Schools and Communities Amid Metro Migrations

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Introduction

A large body of research has documented the *patterns, degree, and effects* of racial segregation.¹ We argue that what is missing from this literature is a more nuanced understanding of the *process* by which segregation is reproduced time and time again. People move. Constant migration and resettlement patterns occur within and between major metro areas. Amid this movement people too often end up segregated and then resegregated by race, ethnicity, social class, and religion.²

Our research examines the racial resegregation *process*—how and why segregation patterns repeat themselves when people move—and the role of housing and schools in that process. Through our mixed-methods study of the housing-school nexus in both suburban and urban contexts, we have learned that resegregation occurs in part because homebuyers’ or renters’ perceptions of the *reputations* of local communities and, by association, their public schools are affected by the race of the people who live there.

The central role played by the “reputations” of different places and schools in housing choices, as well as the relationship between race and these reputations, is something many homebuyers know intuitively but rarely admit. In reality, constructions of “good” and “bad” neighborhoods and schools are based only partly on “tangible factors” such as the physical characteristics of houses and school resources and outcome data. Indeed, “intangible factors,” such as the word-of-mouth reputation and status of one community or school district versus another, strongly sway those with the most choices. The US Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision noted that both tangible and intangible factors matter in the field of education, and we argue that is still the case.

If intangible factors did not have such sway, neighborhood reputations, identities, and property values would not change as quickly as they often do when demographics change prior to tangible changes. For instance, within the rapid gentrification of New York City, the southern side of Harlem—a neighborhood that was seen as “bad” and avoided by many white New Yorkers only 10 years ago—is now one of the hottest real estate markets in the City, even as

1. Burdick-Will et al. (2011); Logan, Minca, and Adar (2012); Massey and Denton (1993); Mickelson (2008); Reardon and Owens (2014); Sampson and Sharkey (2008); Wells and Frankenberg (2007).

2. Bischoff and Reardon (2014); M. Orfield and Luce (2013); Reardon, Yun, and Chmielewski (2012).

most of the housing stock has remained constant. What has changed in Southern Harlem is the race of its residents more than anything, which has influenced the area's reputation.

The space between easily measured “tangible” factors and the reality of how people choose neighborhoods and schools can be studied when researchers control for key tangible factors to examine *when and why* intangible factors such as reputations vary, and how these variations relate to race. In this chapter, therefore, we present findings from our research on the home buying and school choice process in one suburban county and several neighborhoods within a gentrifying city that exhibit high levels of mobility, demographic change, and racial and ethnic segregation.

In these moments of change, when members of a new racial/ethnic group begin moving into a formerly all-white suburb or a once all-black and/or Latino urban community, the correlation between tangible and intangible factors is often temporarily out of sync. That is, in the *suburban context*, the resources and tangible measures of a so-called “good” formerly all-white community and school system could remain high, while the “intangible” factors such as reputation decline with the percentage of white residents. In *urban gentrifying communities*, school reputations can change quickly as more white students enroll and white parents take charge of the PTA, quickly raising thousands of dollars. Other than the PTA coffers, tangible changes in these schools often lag behind. In both instances, *reputations and realities may be far apart*, but that does not stop families—particularly white families with the most housing and neighborhood options—from making choices based on what other people like them say and think,³ thereby feeding into the process of resegregation.⁴

The Rationale for Addressing the Process of Resegregation at This Time

There are many important reasons why researchers and policymakers should focus on the process by which racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status (SES) segregation recurs in housing and schools today. First of all, the *demographics* of the country are becoming increasingly racially/ethnically diverse as well as socioeconomically divided via income

3. Holme (2002); Weininger, Lareau, and Conley (2015).

4. Wall (2017).

inequality.⁵ These changes are even more dramatic among the school-age population where more than 50 percent of students in public schools are now members of one or more racial/ethnic “minority” groups and more than 50 percent are from low-income families.⁶ Yet, at the same time, we know from research on both neighborhood and school segregation that more racial/ethnic diversity does not necessarily lead to more integration,⁷ but it does make integration more possible, and makes the need to fight segregation more urgent.

Secondly, the *metro migration* patterns of the last 30 years have realigned the post-WWII, late-20th-century housing patterns of predominantly black and Latino cities versus predominantly white suburbs. As other chapters in this volume illustrate, growing numbers of middle- and working-class black, Latino and Asian families left cities for the suburbs, seeking the lifestyle whites had sought decades earlier—larger homes and good public schools. Meanwhile, a growing number more affluent whites are moving back into “gentrifying” urban centers.⁸ These recent metro migration patterns have led to a “demographic inversion” of cities and their suburbs.⁹ In theory, as both suburban and urban spaces become more racially and ethnically diverse, there are new opportunities to create, foster and sustain racially and socioeconomically integrated communities and schools.

And finally, amid these demographic changes and migration patterns, research indicates that *racial attitudes* are also changing, as a growing number of people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds in the US, particularly younger cohorts, are more likely to accept cultural differences and view diversity in communities and schools positively.^{10, 11} These attitudinal changes appear to be particularly common among whites who attended desegregated schools

5. Cohn and Caumont (2016)

6. Education Week Research Center (2014).

7. M. Orfield and Luce (2013); Wells et. al. (2014)

8. Coates (2011); DeSena and Shortell (2012); Freeman (2011); Lees, Slater, and Wyly (2013); Zukin (2010).

9. Ehrenhalt (2012).

10. Powell (2002); Adair (2005); G. Orfield (2011); Wells et al. (2009); Stillman (2011); Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley (2012).

11. Stillman (2011); Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley (2012).

themselves¹² and Millennials (those aged 20-35), a racially diverse cohort that is much more likely to prefer living in racially diverse communities.¹³

Taken together, these three factors—demographic change, metro migration patterns, and changing racial attitudes—suggest the potential to increase the number of racially and ethnically diverse schools and communities. The research on residential patterns and school segregation trends, however, tells us a different story—about a process of fleeting or “pass through” diversity, in which communities become diverse on the forefront of suburban and urban change, followed by a process of resegregation as whites continue to flee changing suburbs and people of color are displaced from gentrifying cities.¹⁴

Evidence that the Process of Resegregation Continues in Neighborhoods and Schools

The factors noted above have definitely contributed to an early 21st-century metropolitan America with urban and suburban neighborhoods that are more racially mixed than they have been since the 1920s,¹⁵ but also incredibly unstable and fragile,^{16, 17} as low-income families of color are being displaced from gentrifying urban communities, and the pattern of white flight is recurring in suburbs with increasing numbers of residents of color.¹⁸

Indeed, recent migration patterns have produced “global” neighborhoods that sometimes mirror the racial composition of these diverse metropolitan areas as a whole.¹⁹ But the instability of these communities is evident, particularly when blacks enter once all-white neighborhoods before Latinos and Asians are already living there,²⁰ suggesting that diversity is conditional and fragile.

12. Clotfelter (2001); Wells et al. (2009).

13. Pew Research Center (2014).

14. Wells et al. (2014).

15. Ellen, Horn, and O’Regan (2012); Glaeser and Vigdor (2012); Logan and Zhang (2011); M. Orfield and Luce (2013).

16. Hyra (2015); Logan and Zhang (2011); M. Orfield and Luce (2013); Wells et. al (2014).

17. Berger (2014); Logan and Zhang (2010).

18. DeSena and Shortell (2012); Wells et al. (2014); Zukin (2010).

20. Logan and Zhang (2011).

21. Ibid.

21. Chaskin, Khare, and Joseph (2012); Deener (2012); Mele (2013b); Tach (2009); Tach (2014).

In fact, another nascent area of research on diverse, mixed-income, and mixed-race neighborhoods highlights how, even when some level of diversity at the community level is achieved, the process of micro-segregation, or “intimate” or “symbolic” segregation, often develops within otherwise diverse spaces, making them less stable.²¹ In fact, much of the research on housing and segregation patterns concludes that stabilizing demographically changing neighborhoods requires not just public policies, but also a new level of openness to change and a deeper understanding of what *integration* (as opposed to desegregation and assimilation) means, particularly for those with the most choices.²²

Meanwhile, the research on school choice suggests a similar form of fragility situated in the difference between white parents’ embrace of “diversity in the abstract” and the act of choosing diverse schools programs. Furthermore, recent research shows that even when parents consider diversity to be a benefit, they still tend to choose schools and special or “gifted” programs within schools that are racially homogenous.²³ The unfortunate reality is, therefore, that even when white parents say they prefer racially diverse schools, they often only want diversity at a symbolic level or on their own terms, making “diverse schools” easier to accomplish in theory than in practice.²⁴

It is evident, therefore, that diverse communities *and* public schools are often fragile, unstable, unequal within, and in the process of resegregating. Thus, studying this *process* of resegregation is important to understanding how we might stop or reverse it as our nation becomes increasingly diverse. Below we provide a brief description of the research we conducted from 2009 to 2015 in the suburbs, and from 2015 to today in a city, to document this process of resegregation in both contexts.

Our Urban-Suburban Research on the Fragility of Diverse Communities and Schools

To better understand the fragility of diversity in demographically changing suburban and urban communities, we conducted two studies, one of suburban Nassau County and the other

21. Chaskin, Khare, and Joseph (2012); Deener (2012); Mele (2013b); Tach (2009); Tach (2014).

22. Caldeira (2005); M. Orfield and Luce (2013); Wells et al. (2009); Wells et al. (2014).

23. Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley (2012); Roda and Wells (2012).

24. Wells et al. (2009); Lacireno-Paquet (2012); Roda and Wells (2012).

of gentrifying neighborhoods of New York City. Our research in the suburbs coincided with the aftermath several federal policy initiatives encouraging moderate-income families to buy suburban homes and simultaneous efforts to foster enterprise zones and thus gentrification in the cities.²⁵ It was clear that the metro migration patterns described above were well underway and that the suburbs of rapidly gentrifying New York City were becoming increasingly black, Latino, and Asian. In this context, we focused on the relationship between housing choice, racial/ethnic segregation, and public school district boundary lines. We set out to examine how people made sense of “place”—especially the word-of-mouth reputations of school districts—when buying homes.

Our research was mixed-method and multi-stage and began with qualitative interviews and case studies of Nassau County school districts, followed by quantitative analysis of demographic patterns, academic outcomes, and property values across school district boundaries. Next, using our findings from the quantitative analysis as our guide, we conducted a survey of recent homebuyers and further qualitative interviews with educators, realtors, parents, and survey respondents about perceptions of neighborhood and school “quality.”²⁶ This integrated mixed-methods design allowed us to study the relationship between people’s understandings of the reputations (intangible measures) of communities and their public schools and the material inequalities (tangible factors) across those places. *What we learned from our suburban research is that the racial makeup of school districts matters a great deal in the construction of their reputations, even when tangible factors across districts with different demographics are similar. These different reputations, in turn, affect property values and eventually lead to inequality in tangible factors across school district boundaries. Through our approach, we were able to track this self-fulfilling prophecy of the process of racial resegregation as it occurred.*

Meanwhile, in New York City, in our more recent work in gentrifying communities on the other side of the urban-suburban divide, we are conducting collaborative research²⁷ with public schools caught in the whirlwind of demographic change that are trying to make

25. Engel and McCoy (2008); Ehrenhalt (2012); Frey (2011).

26. Wells et al. (2014).

27. Penuel and Gallagher (2017).

racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity “work” for all students. Through our Public School Support Organization (PSSO) called The Public Good, we initially partnered with three public schools in gentrifying communities. In each of these schools, we conducted about 50 in-depth interviews with parents, educators, and local stakeholders to understand their perception of changes occurring in these schools and their hopes for what meaningful integrated schools would look like. Our sampling technique assures that a wide range of perspectives is captured. We then engage the school staff and parents in a deep dialogue about our findings to unearth areas of difference, particularly points of contention across racial and ethnic lines.

Reconstruction of Neighborhood and Schools Reputations: What Race Has to Do With It

From these two related research projects, we have learned a great deal about the fragility of diverse urban and suburban neighborhoods and schools. In this section of the paper we provide a brief description of the framework we are using to help explain the role of “reputation” or the intangible factors of the housing-school nexus that lead to resegregation over time. In our efforts to understand this process, we turned to a little-known social theory, the Sociology of Reputation, which argues that “reputations” of places and institutions are socially constructed within and in the service of social stratification. Most notably, the reputations of communities and schools are not, as we often assume, based entirely or even primarily on objective criteria that would warrant a good reputation. *Rather, the “reputation” of a given institution or place relates fundamentally to the social status of the people associated with it. Thus, reputations of communities and schools can vary dramatically depending on who lives there and which students enroll, even when other measurable variables – e.g. the quality of the housing, the school test scores and resources – are the same.*

It is true that oftentimes, this strong correlation between high-status people and high-status institutions or neighborhoods is reinforced by profound differences in the “objective” or tangible factors between institutions or places. This is often the case because those most “objective” measures of the “quality” of places and institutions—e.g., “tangible” factors related to resources, academic outcomes, and property values—are measured in a way that privileges

those institutions affiliated with the highest-status people.²⁸ But recent research, ours included, demonstrates that even when these tangible factors are controlled for, the differential status of people, based on race, ethnicity, and SES, strongly correlates with the status and thus the “reputation” of a place or institution.²⁹ In other words, no matter how phenomenal teachers in a school serving low-income students of color may be, these places are rarely, if ever, deemed highly reputable or “good.”

Exclusions from neighborhoods and institutions have historically been “inescapable marks of inferior public standing in the United States.”³⁰ For instance, people rejected by institutions such as elite country clubs and sororities are often lower status than those who were admitted. In other words, institutions and communities that are most selective or expensive and thus most difficult to access have the highest status and, in turn, confer the most status upon their members.³¹ Scarcity of access makes something more desirable and valuable, even if tangible differences between two institutions are negligible. To learn more about the process of resegregation, therefore, the places we most need to study are those communities and school districts in which the relationship between tangible and intangible factors is out of sync as the racial/ethnic makeup of the student body is changing quickly. *In some schools that are in the first phases of these demographic transitions, the tangible factors, including funding, curricular offerings, teaching staff, and student outcomes, change very little initially. But as the skin color of the student population changes, becoming either less (suburbs) or more (gentrifying city) white, the intangible reputation of the district often declines or increases even absent tangible changes.* In these moments, suburban homebuyers and parents in gentrifying city neighborhoods make decisions about education often based primarily on the reputations of schools as constructed by their peers and social networks.³²

28. Caplow (1964); Jencks and Phillips (1998); Jiménez and Horowitz (2013); Leonardo and Grubb (2013).

29. Caplow (1964); Saporito (1998); Strathdee (2009).

30. Rosenblum (1998), 83.

31. Caplow (1964).

32. Holme (2002); Rhodes and Warkentien (2017).

The Color of Property Values

One obvious way to estimate the value of reputations of communities and school districts is through the price individuals and families are willing to pay to live in particular places. A central challenge in estimating the relationship between school socio-demographics and home prices is disentangling the effects of school characteristics from the effects of home quality (in terms of size and construction) and neighborhood quality (both physical and reputational characteristics). Much of the prior research on the link between school quality and home prices has relied on standard hedonic price models, which decompose home price into its constituent characteristics (e.g., age, number of bedrooms, bathrooms), and obtain estimates of the contributory value of each characteristic. This approach, however, typically fails to adequately control for neighborhood characteristics.³³

In Nassau County, we addressed this concern by using a “boundary fixed-effect”³⁴ approach, starting with Geographic Information System (GIS) software to spatially identify homes in close proximity to school district boundaries. We then restricted our analyses to homes directly on either side of the same district boundary (within a 0.25 mile), with the assumption that they are comparable in terms of neighborhood characteristics, even as they are located in different school districts.

We then explored the extent to which home values and school district racial/ethnic composition are linked after accounting for such tangible differences in home, school district, and neighborhood characteristics. We found an association between school district racial/ethnic composition and home values, even after controlling for covariates related to school, neighborhood, and home characteristics. Specifically, we found that a 1-percent increase in Black/Hispanic enrollment is associated with a 0.3-percent decrease in home values ($p < .001$). *Put another way: given Nassau County’s 2010 median home price of \$415,000, if two homes are similar with respect to measurable home, community, and school district characteristics and unmeasurable neighborhood characteristics, but one is in a 30 percent*

33. Black (1999).

34. Ibid.

black/Hispanic district while the other is in a 70 percent black/Hispanic district, their prices would differ by almost \$50,000.³⁵

Colorblind Explanations for the Color of Property: School District Reputations

The findings above pointing to the relationship between racial demographics and property values across school district boundaries, even after controlling for the tangible variables most likely to affect the cost of a home, help us to see the gap between the material reality and the intangible construction of the reputation, status, and ultimately desirability of one community and school district over another. In this section, we present the findings from our survey of Nassau County homebuyers³⁶ to help us understand how people make meaning of the reputation or “desirability” of a community and school district and how that changes as the student population changes prior to measurable differences in the tangible factors. We compared data on tangible characteristics related to public schools in Nassau County—particularly standardized test scores and other student outcomes, student demographics, and per-pupil funding—across the 56 school districts and then compared these characteristics to survey responses on school district reputations.

Our survey of residents who bought homes in Nassau County between 2005 and 2010 was designed to elicit feedback on how people moving into (or within) the racially divided county made decisions about where to live. We wanted to know what was most important to them in making home buying choices amid Nassau County’s multiple municipal and school district boundaries. Because we had the home addresses of all the survey respondents, we were able to analyze their responses broken down by the racial makeup of the school districts into which they moved. We learned from the survey, among other findings, that there are associations ($p < .001$) between the racial makeup of students in a respondent’s local school

35. See Wells et. al, 2014 for a detailed discussion of these findings.

36. We had only mailing addresses for the properties bought and sold during this time period, thus we could administer the survey only by mail, with each mailing addressed to “resident.” Our final response rate was 10 percent, with a total of nearly 500 surveys returned. While this response is not as high as we had hoped, it is acceptable for a mailed survey, and our findings for several important questions are statistically significant.

district and the degree to which they were persuaded to move into their district by their perceptions of the public school reputations (i.e., how others talked about the quality of the local public schools). We found, for instance, that schools' reputation mattered more in the decision-making process for homebuyers who moved to districts with high proportions of white and/or Asian students than for those in districts serving predominantly black and/or Hispanic students (see Wells et.al, 2014). In other words, homebuyers in predominantly white and/or Asian districts put more emphasis on intangible characteristics related to *where* the house is located than do those in districts with more black and/or Latino students. These findings further our understanding of the sociology of reputation as it relates to racial distinctions in institutional reputations.³⁷

Status of Schools, Status of Students: Choosing Classmates when Choosing Neighborhoods

As our analysis of property values and survey data suggest, the housing-school nexus is as much about intangible (reputational) factors as it is about tangible (material) factors. Furthermore, we see how the reputations of communities and their schools are co-determined by the social status of their members.³⁸ In the context of a racially stratified society, school status, in most instances, is inversely correlated with high proportions of "minorities," especially blacks.³⁹ Predominantly white and/or Asian schools regularly have much better reputations, whether the reputations are based on tangible measures of success or not.

The co-determined relationship between the reputation of a school and the status of the students and families associated with it no doubt affects school choices, with race as a central feature of how status is constructed. The research on school choice clearly demonstrates a negative correlation between white parents' perceptions of school quality or reputation and the percentage of students of color enrolled.⁴⁰ For instance, one study that focused on the effects of school racial composition and several nonracial school characteristics

37. It is important to note that our demographic analysis of where respondents live shows no significant difference across school districts in whether the respondents have school-age and pre-school children, their self-ranking in terms of politics, or whether they rent or own their current residence.

38. Caplow (1964).

39. Wells (2014).

40. Johnson and Shapiro (2003); Karsten et al. (2003); Saporito (1998); Roda and Wells (2012).

on white parents' school choices found that *the proportion of black students in a hypothetical school has a consistent and significant inverse association with the likelihood of white parents enrolling their children in that school, even after controlling for many school quality factors.*⁴¹

Given the power of race to influence white parents' perceptions of school reputations, we studied, through qualitative interviews, how parents understand school quality and how this affects the *process* of resegregation. Here we draw on the interview data from the suburban and urban phases of our research to emphasize two key points:

1. Parents with children in highly reputable, predominantly white schools sometimes question the validity of these reputations, which suggests they may not be warranted.
2. Many K-12 education policies perpetuate different school reputations by race.

These two themes look slightly different in the urban gentrifying versus the suburban context of increasing diversity because in the urban neighborhoods parents have access to more school choices—either public schools of choice, charter, or private schools—without having to move. In the suburbs, where housing choices and school choices are more tightly tied, parents are more aware of the housing-school nexus when they buy a home.

When the Reputation of a Place Precedes It

As we noted above, tangible distinctions across school districts with varied reputations are often real and meaningful, as schools serving low-income students of color are more likely to lack resources, attract fewer highly qualified teachers, and have less challenging curriculum.⁴² *But our in-depth interview data also suggest that there are moments in which the respondents see the gaps between the reputations and reality, between the intangible and tangible.* But even in those moments, when respondents question their own certainty about the value of one district over another, they are quick to defend their choices, which ultimately rationalizes their movement away from those suburbs in which the demographics of the students are changing most rapidly.

41. Billingham and Hunt (2016).

42. Wells and Frankenberg (2007).

Still, there is ample evidence in our data of the multiple ruptures within the strong relationship between tangible and intangible factors that make a place and school district what it is. The interviews revealed uncertainty and critique of most of the highly reputable school districts and urban schools, as respondents suggested that their reputations are exaggerated. Some respondents seem to think that some of the “hype” related to certain schools or districts had as much to do with the status of the families associated with these institutions as it did with the actual quality of the education within the schools. Strongly related to the survey responses, the interview data reveal that “recommendation, reputation, and word-of-mouth shared understandings” are key reasons why people with resources and choices move where they do. They frequently defend the reputation of their schools by noting one or more dimensions of the “quality” of people associated with them.

Interestingly enough, these respondents also voice dismay about the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in these high-status schools, noting that such diversity is more representative of the “real world.” Still, status and reputation—especially as it corresponds to the status of the residents who live there—trumps “reality” in terms of their concerns about school quality or the downsides of racial/ethnic and socioeconomic homogeneity. In the end, what people *think* about a place is as important – sometimes more so -- as what the place actually is.

For instance, a white, upper-middle-class parent who is one of the leaders of the district-wide PTA in an affluent, highly reputable suburban school district where she and her husband bought a home ten years earlier, exemplifies this theme. She questioned many aspects of the “quality” of the educational system in her district, but she did not question the fact that most people perceive the district to be very good and that those with the resources to live there will pay the hefty housing costs and the property taxes that come with it:

My husband grew up in the next town over, and I think he always felt like this was better. I don’t know why. I just think its reputation precedes it. I think that many people believe that, and I think historically they look to what they’ve heard more so than anything else. I don’t know how much research is actually out there that says this is so much better than that. I think it was really the ... location.

This mother was not the only person in this high-priced school district who simultaneously wondered if the district was worth the hype – or the cost -- and yet was happy

to live in such a reputable, virtually all-white and affluent community and school district. In fact, we saw many instances in which people put a lot of time, energy and resources into being in the “right” school districts based on recommendation, reputation, and word-of-mouth shared understandings. Given the cost of living in these communities, it is amazing that reputation and reality are not better synchronized, but in fact, there were many, many instances in which respondents questioned the tangible price or the market “value” of the property and houses in a particular school district. Many respondents said they thought the prices people pay for certain houses are completely out of line with the tangible dimensions of their purchase. As the superintendent of one of the most highly ranked school districts (according to test scores, graduation rates, and college acceptances) noted, homebuyers assess school district quality based on the reputation, or “word on the street,” even more than on the tangible data on schools or houses. The cost of a house in his district, he said, is highly inflated as a result:

You move to [this district] for one reason. Very frankly you’re not moving here because the house that you’re paying \$800,000 for is particularly pretty ... it’s not a particularly big house or pretty house. You’re moving here to send your kids here to school... My guess is I would show you an \$800,000 house that you would be unimpressed with. You’d say, ‘My God for \$800,000 I’m not buying that.

Similarly, in the urban, gentrifying context, we have interviewed white, affluent parents whose apartment buildings have been re-zoned for a predominantly black and Latino, low-income school. While most of these parents are opting out of putting their children in this school, seeking public schools of choice, charter, or private school options, they are making these choices somewhat defensively because they have heard that the new zoned school has much to offer, even if the test scores are not as high as they are in other schools with more white and affluent students. Additionally, they worry that these other highly reputable schools may not be as good as they are said to be.

One mother told us that there were many unspoken problems with the highly reputable school her son attends, which also has more white and affluent students than the newly zoned school. She talked about overcrowding, too many entitled children and parents, and some questionable teaching methods. This was an affluent parent who had researched the “new zone,” mostly black and Latino school and was impressed with many aspects of the program,

including the science curriculum, and the quality of the teachers. Furthermore, the new zone school is much closer to her apartment than the reputable school her son attends. She noted that even several months after her son started kindergarten at the other school, “we still today are not sure that we did the right thing. I have no idea. I’m hesitant. I cannot tell you it was the right thing to do.”

In the end, she chose reputation above all else when deciding where to enroll her son in kindergarten, which resulted in him attending a more racially homogeneous but highly reputable school with higher test scores. In the final section of this paper, we discuss the ways in which the accountability system in K-12 education in the US perpetuates and legitimates such school choices despite some uncertainty on the part of parents.

K-12 Education Policies and Practices that Perpetuate Different School Reputations by Race

At a recent meeting of white, affluent New York City parents of pre-school children now zoned for the “new zone” public elementary school (90 percent black and Latino) discussed above, one father shouted angrily that this school is a “disaster.” When asked how he knew this, he said the “metrics,” meaning the standardized test scores for English Language Arts and Math in grades 3-5, are “abysmal.” When asked if he had ever visited the school or attended one of the many parent tours it offers, he said “no,” adding that the data tell him everything.

The average test scores for the students in this school are indeed much lower than those of the predominantly white school that his child would have attended prior to the zoning change. But the school this father vehemently labeled a “disaster” is, based on our in-depth research on the programs and pedagogy, far from a disaster. As the mother quoted above notes, this “new zone” school has many laudable educational assets, including a strong science curriculum, a focus on the social and emotional development of children, a nurturing early childhood program, some excellent teachers, and a deep and meaningful connection to the African American community it had served for years. While this school may not be the best “fit” for every family in its new, broader attendance zone, to call it a “disaster” without ever stepping foot inside its doors seems more than unfair. Still, this irate parent’s view of this school due to its standardized test scores alone is the “new normal” in public education.

Parents base extremely important and life-changing decisions on the intersection between the “word of mouth” reputations of schools and the data that rationalizes these decisions. And we rarely question the veracity of those reputations or the narrow metrics that reinforce them.⁴³

Within the sociology of reputation literature, researchers have studied the uses of data, especially the test scores of incoming students, in the ranking of higher education institutions in the popular press. This process has created status hierarchies based primarily on narrow measures that make schools hypersensitive to their positions. Research on the law schools’ response to these rankings has shown they adjust their behavior to increase their ranking, which helps them attract “high-quality” (based on the same measures) students and faculty members. As a result, law schools have increased their spending on merit-based scholarships as they attempt to “buy” top students.⁴⁴ In turn, these desirable students, whose credentials augment the law school’s ranking, are attracted to the highest-ranked schools.

In the K-12 educational context, we argue, the two most popular educational reforms of the last few decades—the standards/accountability movement and free-market school choice policies—have combined to create the same sort of cyclical process.⁴⁵ Since the 1990s, all states have implemented new standards and tests to hold schools accountable for student outcomes, and almost all have adopted one form of market-based school choice policy: either charter schools, open enrollment programs, vouchers, or tuition tax credit policies.⁴⁶ Federal laws and competitive programs have required, prodded, and/or supported these state accountability and school choice policies.⁴⁷

While these policies have been promoted as colorblind and outcomes-based solutions to the racial achievement gap, we argue that their colorblindness—in fact, a blindness to what we know about the long history of the correlation between race, SES, and standardized test scores⁴⁸—actually converts the long legacy of racial inequality and the racial biases of these tests into false evidence about educational quality. Thus, the increased reliance on such tests in

43. Jencks (1998); Jiménez and Horowitz (2013).

44. Sauder (2005).

45. Helms (1992); Linn (2001); Rothstein (2013); Wells and Holme (2005); Wells (2014).

46. Abrams (2016); Goldstein (2014); Welner (2008).

47. Leonardo and Grubb (2013); Wells (2014).

48. Gould (1996).

education policy has reinforced negative perceptions of public schools enrolling large numbers of black and Latino students.⁴⁹ But we also know, based on our analysis above in which test scores are controlled, that these perceptions of schools enrolling mostly students of color would most likely exist any way. The scores simply provided the “evidence” that racialized understandings of school quality are legitimate.

A school board member in a Nassau County school district, which had changed from 95 percent to less than 60 percent white in a short period of time, talked about the district leadership trying to preserve some of the non-test-related programs such as art and music—areas in which many students who do not have high test scores excel. But when so much emphasis is being placed on test scores and budgets are being cut, priorities need to be set. This creates a quandary for district leaders who understand education to be more multi-faceted. According to this Board member:

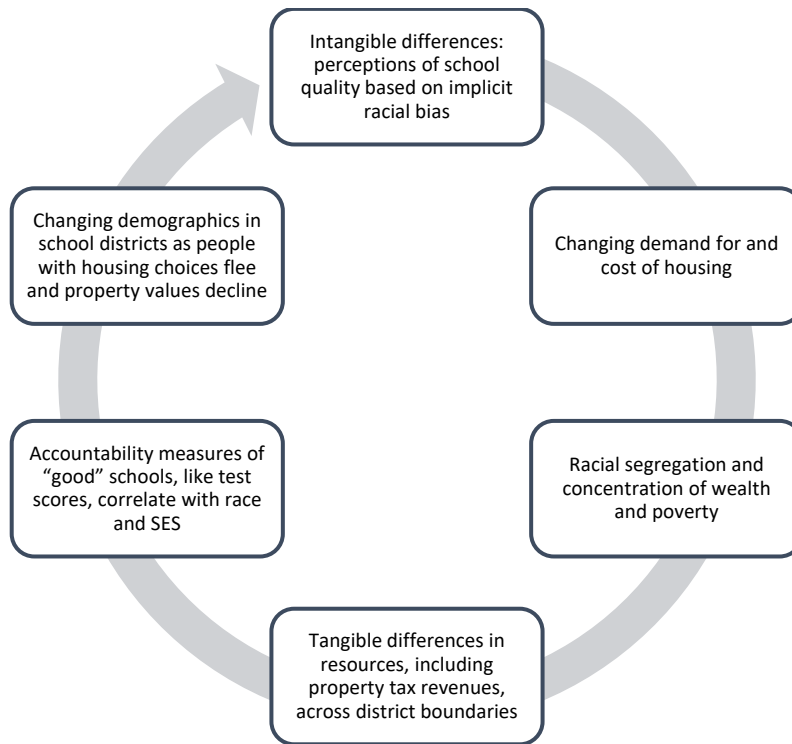
If you’re talking about the whole child and, you know, really kind of encouraging children to flourish in all aspects of their personality and educational opportunity, then arts is as important as academics. And you can’t test those things ... tests are not the only thing that can determine ... the worth of a school district.

Policy Recommendations to Address the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Resegregation

Policymakers and advocates who want to address racial inequality in American housing and schools must appreciate the iterative relationship between *intangible* and *tangible* factors in the housing-school nexus. One begets the other, in a cyclical process outlined in Figure 1, as neighborhood demographics change. This process eventually turns the biased perception that whiter schools are better and less-white schools are worse into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

49. Wells (2014).

Figure 1. The Housing-School Nexus and The Process of Resegregation



Breaking this cycle at the point at which intangible perceptions of place have changed but tangible measures of housing and schools have not is critical to disrupting the housing-school nexus of racial segregation. *The following recommendations are a start:*

Policymakers should capitalize on changing racial attitudes in the US, particularly among the younger generations, to promote and stabilize diverse communities and public schools. Everything from student assignment policies to support and incentives for curriculum and teaching approaches that tap into the educational benefits of diversity in classrooms can and should be attempted.⁵⁰ Indeed, in the midst of increasing immigration and changing demographics, Americans of all racial and ethnic groups are increasingly likely to be accepting of cultural differences and to view diversity in social situations as a positive characteristic.⁵¹

Policymakers must consider how current accountability policies in the field of education exacerbate segregation and inequality. Fair-housing advocates have increasingly

50. Adair (2005); Powell (2002).

51. Alba and Nee (2003); Krysan and Moberg (2016).

prioritized the stabilization and sustainability of diverse communities; education policy and practice needs to follow suit. Successful diverse public schools help all students succeed by tapping into the gifts and talents that each student brings to the classroom while providing meaningful support services to students who lack some of the academic skills needed to keep up with their more privileged peers.⁵² Such successful racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse public schools help stabilize diverse communities and send important, inclusive messages about who belongs there. But unless we change the way we rank, measure, and evaluate racially and ethnically diverse public schools and districts, we will never solve the problem of separate and unequal public education.

Within racially diverse schools, educators and parents must push back against policies and rankings that focus primarily on standardized test scores to define “good” schools. Such narrow measures devalue schools that enroll more students from lower-income and recent-immigrant, non-English-speaking families. These diverse schools may have somewhat lower test scores but they better prepare children for culturally complex colleges and work environments. Such educational factors should be “valued” in the real estate market —on sites such as Trulia—and in societal definitions of “good” schools.

In diverse districts, local leaders and their constituents must embrace the new demographics of their communities and promote them as places forward-thinking people want to “be,” not “flee,” in both suburban and urban contexts. In suburban contexts, education officials need to work with realtors, developers, and local zoning boards to ensure that their residential population remains balanced and relatively stable in terms of racial identities, cultural backgrounds and income levels. Local infrastructure, including “downtown” areas, must be maintained, and moderate-income housing should be scattered to assure that no one part of town or neighborhood elementary school becomes seen as less “desirable.”

Across the country, many changing suburbs like Ferguson, Missouri, are beginning to follow the lead of places like Oak Park, Illinois outside of Chicago; Shaker Heights, Ohio, which borders Cleveland; or Maplewood-South Orange near Newark, New Jersey. These communities, working with local realtors, set out several decades ago to assure that as blacks and Latinos moved in,

52. Wells et al. (2016).

white residents did not flee. Organizers knew that too much white flight too quickly would lead to a downward spiral of lower property values, tax revenue and local services. While these efforts have helped to stabilize the residential populations in these towns, there is still work to do in the local public schools as educators struggle to address within-school segregation and white flight to private schools.

Meanwhile, in urban, gentrifying areas, sustainable and affordable housing and school enrollment policies must support diversity in rapidly changing neighborhoods. As more white and affluent parents move in to the communities their grandparents fled after World War II, public policies must assure that low-income families of color that have lived in these communities for many years are able to find affordable housing and keep their children in local public schools. Such proactive policies sustain diverse neighborhoods and schools.

In both urban and suburban contexts, therefore, we must support efforts to sustain racially and ethnically diverse school districts *and* to stabilize their residential and student populations. We must value that diversity as an important factor in preparing children for the twenty-first century. The future of our increasingly diverse country requires policymakers and leaders, from DC to the state capitals to the local town councils and school boards, to take action.

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