

PRRAC

Poverty & Race Research Action Council

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Comments Regarding Proposed Elementary School Boundary Changes in Loudoun County Public Schools

As members of the National Coalition on School Diversity¹ we have been following developments in Loudoun County related to proposed changes in your elementary school student assignment boundaries. We are writing to express our concern with any proposals that would concentrate low-income students and English Learners (ELs) in what is overall an affluent district (fewer than 20% of the County's nearly 77,000 students are economically disadvantaged) with a relatively small percentage (13%) of ELs.² It also appears that these proposed changes will increase racial/ethnic segregation and isolation in the school district, which may separately violate federal law. These comments, however, will address the research on educational outcomes for low income children in different educational settings.

A significant body of evidence indicates that racial/ethnic segregation and poverty concentration are systematically linked to unequal educational opportunities, and are "strongly related to an array of factors that limit educational opportunities and outcomes...[including] less experienced and less qualified teachers, high levels of teacher turnover, less successful peer groups and inadequate facilities and learning materials."³ While there are limited examples of high-poverty, racially isolated schools that consistently demonstrate academic success (potentially including some in Loudoun County), as a whole, our most vulnerable students do not receive the education they deserve in those settings.⁴

Here are some of aspects/characterizations of the current discourse that we find particularly troubling:

- Loudoun Now's report that, "Most Loudoun County School Board members seem to be leaning toward making major changes to Leesburg school assignments to fix *what they consider an unwarranted distribution of the town's poorest and non-English-speaking students*,"⁵ seems to suggest that a majority of board members is completely ignoring the vast amount of research that supports the use of socioeconomic integration strategies.
- The Plan 12 rationale claims that, "pursuing socio-economic balance in elementary schools has become extremely difficult to maintain and is *beginning to evidence weaknesses in terms of*

¹ For more information, see <http://school-diversity.org>.

² Accessed from Loudoun County website <http://webinter.lcps.org/schoolprofiles> (03/28/16)

³ Gary Orfield et al., *E Pluribus... Separation: Deepening Double Segregation for More Students* (Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, 2012), 21, available at http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/mlk-national/e-pluribus...separation-deepening-double-segregation-for-more-students/orfield_epluribus_revised_complete_2012.pdf.

⁴ Douglas N. Harris, *Ending the Blame Game on Educational Inequity: A Study of "High Flying" Schools and NCLB* (Arizona State University, 2006), retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED508527.pdf>.

⁵ Danielle Nadler, "School Leaders Eye 'Paradigm Shift' for Leesburg Boundaries," Loudoun Now, (March 14, 2015) available at <http://www.loudounnow.com/2016/03/14/school-leaders-eye-paradigm-shift-for-leesburg-boundaries/>

student performance among many ‘at-risk’ student subgroups,”⁶ but it is unclear what “weaknesses” in subgroup performance are being caused by the current assignment plan.

- Plan 12’s rationale further posits that allowing a “naturally occurring concentration” of low-income and EL students to form will enable Loudoun County to “target attention and resources to students who need them,”⁷ in contrast to a rezoning paradigm that allegedly “makes focusing of much needed attention and resources to FRM and ELL students in Central Loudon impractical and inefficient.”⁸ It is unclear how concentrating low-income students will help educators focus more attention on them, nor has the board articulated how EL students will benefit from attending schools with higher percentages of EL students.
- A recent Washington Post article quoted board member Jill Turgeon as saying, “*When you have students that have common needs, you can direct your instructional methods in that manner and you have more resources because you have more students with that particular need.... When we’re balancing demographics...to me we’re watering down the focus we need to have on the students.”⁹ These statements are similarly vague and disconnected from the research; if specific instructional methods are being considered as rationale for changes in student assignment, they should be openly discussed as part of the public discourse.*
- Much of the language community members and board members are using to frame this issue (e.g. labeling EL students as “distractions,” characterizing the influx of ELs and low-income students as a “culture shift” that has negatively affected test scores, driven away talented teachers, made it more difficult for children to make friends, strained parent volunteers, etc.¹⁰) seems to be geared towards maintaining the privileged status of white, affluent students and overlooking the equal status and contributions/assets of Loudoun County’s low-income and EL students.

A thorough review of the evidence contradicts claims that isolating low-income students will raise their performance.

It is unclear what “common needs” Loudoun County’s low-income students have that would be better served if they were concentrated together. While higher concentrations of low-income students may or may not make schools more eligible for Title I funds, such funding does not guarantee that low-income students will receive the resources they ultimately need. Nor does this mean that isolated low-income students will perform better relative to integrated low-income students. To the contrary, the cumulative effects of concentrating socioeconomic disadvantage are well documented. For example, research suggests that low-poverty schools are *twenty-two times more likely* to be consistently high-performing compared to high-poverty schools.¹¹ A new study by Stanford University Professor Sean Reardon found “very clear evidence that one aspect of segregation in particular—the disparity in average school poverty rates between white and black students’ schools—is consistently the single most

⁶ Central Loudoun Elementary School Attendance Zone Review -Plan 12 Rationale, available at <http://www.lcps.org/cms/lib4/VA01000195/Centricity/Domain/66/Central%20Loudoun%20ES%20Attend%20Boundaries/Plans%20with%20Rationale/Plan12wRationale.pdf>

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ See Moriah Balingit, “Separate but equal? Wealthy county’s plan would concentrate low-income, Hispanic students,” The Washington Post, (March 20, 2016), available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/separate-but-equal-loudoun-plan-would-concentrate-poor-hispanic-students/2016/03/20/db6f2cca-e7a8-11e5-b0fd-073d5930a7b7_story.html.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ University of Wisconsin Professor Douglas Harris reviewed test score data and found that only 1.1 percent of high-poverty schools scored in the top third of the state in either reading or math over two years. If the schools have both high levels of poverty and high numbers of students of color (more than 50 percent), then the share of high scoring schools falls to .3 percent of schools. Douglas Harris, “High Flying Schools, Student Disadvantage and the Logic of NCLB,” American Journal of Education 113 (2007): 367-394.

powerful correlate of achievement gaps.” Further, a study of school reform efforts in Montgomery County, Maryland reveals that the socioeconomic integration of students results in greater academic gains for low-income students than directing significant additional financial resources to predominately low-income schools.¹²

In contrast, studies consistently show that racially, culturally, and economically diverse schools are strongly associated with a range of short and long term benefits for all racial groups.¹³ This includes gains in math, science, reading, and critical thinking skills and improvements in graduation rates.¹⁴ Research also demonstrates that diverse schools are better equipped than high-poverty schools to counteract the negative effects of poverty.¹⁵ Over the long-term, students who attend diverse schools are more likely than students from homogeneous schools to choose diverse colleges, neighborhoods, and workplaces later in life.¹⁶ They possess better critical thinking skills and analytical ability and are more likely to form cross-racial friendships.¹⁷ Desegregated schooling produces better adult socioeconomic and health outcomes for Black students, including “significantly increased both educational and occupational attainments, college quality and adult earnings, reduced the probability of incarceration, and improved adult health status,”¹⁸ at least in part as a result of improved access to school resources, including reductions in class size, and increases in per-pupil spending. Furthermore, a recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that the racial composition of schools has no negative impact on test scores for White students, while less segregated schools result in higher scores for minority students.¹⁹

A thorough review of the evidence contradicts claims that isolating English Learners will raise their performance. Generally “[s]egregation by language is problematic for ELLs—including Latino ELLs—because meaningful exposure to English-speaking peers and contexts is vital for acquisition of

¹² Schwartz, H. (2010). *Housing Policy Is School Policy: Economically Integrative Housing Promotes Academic Success in Montgomery County, Maryland*. New York: The Century Foundation, available at <https://tcf.org/assets/downloads/tcf-Schwartz.pdf>

¹³ For a summary of this research, see Roslyn Mickelson, “School Integration and K-12 Educational Outcomes: A Quick Synthesis of Social Science Evidence,” (National Coalition on School Diversity, 2015), available at <http://www.school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo5.pdf>; Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, “How Non-Minority Students Also Benefit from Racially Diverse Schools,” (National Coalition on School Diversity, 2012), available at <http://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo8.pdf>.

¹⁴ For a summary of this research, see Susan Eaton, “School Racial and Economic Composition & Math and Science Achievement,” (National Coalition on School Diversity, 2011), available at <http://www.school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo1.pdf>; Susan Eaton, “How the Racial and Socioeconomic Composition of Schools and Classrooms Contributes to Literacy, Behavioral Climate, Instructional Organization and High School Graduation Rates,” (National Coalition on School Diversity, 2011), available at <http://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo2.pdf>.

¹⁵ For a summary of this research, see Philip Tegeler, Roslyn Mickelson, and Martha Bottia, “What We Know about School Integration, College Attendance, and the Reduction of Poverty,” (National Coalition on School Diversity, 2011), available at <http://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo4.pdf>.

¹⁶ For a summary of this research, see Susan Eaton and Gina Chirichigno, “The Impact of Racially Diverse Schools in a Democratic Society,” (National Coalition on School Diversity, 2011), available at <http://www.school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo3.pdf>.

¹⁷ Supra note 14. See also Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, “How Non-Minority Students Also Benefit from Racially Diverse Schools,” (National Coalition on School Diversity, 2012), available at <http://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo8.pdf>.

¹⁸ Rucker Johnson, “Long-run Impacts of School Desegregation & School Quality on Adult Attainments” (NBER Working Paper No. 16664, 2015) available at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w16664>

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Education, *School Composition and the Black-White Achievement Gap*, National Center for Education Statistics, (2015), available at https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/studies/pdf/school_composition_and_the_bw_achievement_gap_2015.pdf.

English.”²⁰ Parents and community members should not be expected to take Loudoun County at its word—that a deliberate choice to concentrate EL students will “better serve” their needs—when no clear instructional plan has been articulated that would justify such a change (e.g. the creation of a two-way bilingual program to which students in the region could voluntarily enroll). This is particularly true when EL students have been openly labeled as a “distraction” by parents supporting plans that would increase concentrate low-income and EL students. Policy shifts of this nature warrant our skepticism in light of our nation’s long history of discrimination, and this is no exception.

It may, indeed, be time for a “paradigm shift” in Loudoun County, but it is likely not the one currently being contemplated. Rather, it is one that will require educators to fully embrace the growth and demographic shifts that are occurring, with an eye towards equity and inclusion. Loudoun County has begun to experience firsthand some of the challenges educators in high-poverty schools and communities have been facing for decades. We can certainly appreciate the desire for additional resources and more stability in student assignment. But it is vitally important to ensure that educators in Loudoun County are well equipped to respond to the demographic changes their schools are experiencing, in order to ensure that you continue to attract and retain high-quality educators. A well-designed student assignment plan can certainly play a constructive role in stabilizing enrollment and ensuring that no school in your system becomes overwhelmed. In the long run, forging a more deliberate path will be worth your effort.

The discourse on the value of integration in Loudoun County is quite timely. In his last few months as the New York State Commissioner of Education, our current Secretary of Education (John King) launched a pilot program to encourage the state’s poorest and lowest-performing school districts to formulate plans to encourage socioeconomic diversity.²¹ In his first few months at the Department, he included a \$120 million request in the 2017 budget to fund the “Stronger Together” initiative. If funded, this competitive funding program would offer planning and implementation grants for voluntary, community-developed socioeconomic integration plans. The proposed 2017 budget also includes an increase in funding for the Magnet Schools Assistance Program, which also supports school integration. It would be ironic for Loudoun County to turn its back on its integration efforts at the precise moment that national policymakers are turning their attention toward it.

The student assignment process is one that warrants high levels of community engagement, transparency, and deliberation. Your Vision 20/20 Strategic Framework lists a desire to cultivate “[s]trong partnerships with families and our community enhance our excellence,” “[a]n inclusive, safe, caring, and challenging learning environment serves as the foundation for student growth,” and “[t]ransparency and good stewardship of resources strengthen public trust and support” as three of your core beliefs. If these principles guide both the process and the substance of your student assignment planning, we believe that Loudoun County’s board will arrive at a sound conclusion.

²⁰ Janie Tankard Carnock and April Ege, “The ‘Triple Segregation’ of Latinos, ELLs: What Can We Do?” in (New America, November 17, 2015) <http://www.edcentral.org/latinos-segregation/>. See also Beatriz Arias, *School Desegregation, Linguistic Segregation and Access to English for Latino Students* (2007, Arizona State University) (arguing that “access to English is an integral component of the learning opportunity denied many Latino students”), available at <http://cedar.wvu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1034&context=jec>

²¹ See <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/funding/2015-18-title-1-ses-integration-grant/home.html> for more information.

Sincerely,

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