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Diverse Housing, Diverse Schooling: How Policy Can Stabilize Racial Demographic Change in Cities and Suburbs

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DIVERSE HOUSING, DIVERSE SCHOOLING

HOW POLICY CAN STABILIZE RACIAL DEMOGRAPHIC
CHANGE IN CITIES AND SUBURBS

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DIVERSE HOUSING, DIVERSE SCHOOLING: HOW POLICY CAN STABILIZE RACIAL DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN CITIES AND SUBURBS

Amy Stuart Wells, Columbia University

Executive Summary

Too often in the U.S., children’s zip codes determine their educational opportunities due to the tight relationship between racially segregated and unequal housing and schools. But the nation may now have the ideal opportunity to address this housing-school nexus, according to a growing number of scholars, policymakers and advocates. Policymakers can take advantage of the increasing diversity of our population and recent metro migration patterns, as more Whites move into gentrifying urban neighborhoods and people of color move to suburbs like Ferguson, Missouri. In both contexts, policymakers can mitigate White flight from diversifying suburbs as well as rapid displacement of families of color from gentrifying urban neighborhoods, thereby sustaining diverse communities and schools across metro areas.

As these migration patterns are occurring, past policies that have most successfully disrupted the segregated housing-school nexus—especially school desegregation plans, are being dismantled. Those policies have been replaced with supposedly “colorblind” school choice options, such as charter schools, that often exacerbate racial segregation due in part to their lack of student transportation and failure to comply with racial balancing guidelines. But stabilizing racially diverse communities and their public schools is hard work, requiring progressive and carefully coordinated housing and education policies.

The main body of this policy brief provides a review of the social science evidence on the housing-school nexus, highlighting the problem of reoccurring racial segregation and inequality absent strong, proactive federal or state integration policies. Three areas of research are covered: (a) the nature of the housing-school nexus, (b) the impact of school desegregation and housing integration policies on the nexus, and (c) the connection between the implicit racial biases literature (the “perceptions of place”) to research on school and housing choices.

What this literature demonstrates is that the process of resegregation is far more complicated than any *tangible*, measurable distinctions between schools and neighborhoods across the racial dividing line. In fact, parents’ perceptions of public schools in particular and the implicit race-related assumptions they make about the quality of those schools explain the so-called “*intangible*” factors of education – e.g. the reputation and status of a school – that the Supreme Court noted in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

The implication of this research is that 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 as neighborhood demographics change. This process eventually leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy of “good” and “bad” schools that is strongly correlated

with race. 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 outline a way to start breaking the cycle:

Policymakers should embrace and capitalize on changing racial attitudes in the U.S., particularly among the younger generations, to promote and stabilize diverse communities and public schools.

In the midst of more diversified immigration patterns 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, even as they continue to make choices between racially separate and unequal places to live and go to school.

Policymakers must consider how current accountability policies in the field of education exacerbate segregation and inequality.

The narrow accountability systems grounded in standardized test scores undervalue the true educational benefits of diverse schools that enroll some students from lower-income and recent-immigrant, non-English-speaking families. Although these diverse schools may well have somewhat lower average test scores than all-White schools in affluent communities, they have an advantage in terms of better preparing their students for the 21st Century.

Local leaders and their constituents must embrace the new demographics of their communities and promote them as places forward-thinking people want to “be” and not “flee” in the suburban context. Meanwhile, sustainable and affordable housing and school enrollment policies must support diversity in gentrifying urban neighborhoods. In both contexts, stable and diverse communities and their schools must be sustained.

They need to work with realtors, developers and locals zoning boards to deliberately and powerfully advance the goal of a balanced and relatively stable residential population, 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 part of town or neighborhood elementary school becomes less “desirable” than another.

These sorts of proactive measures from our federal and state policymakers will help to sustain racially and ethnically diverse school districts and their educational benefits *while* stabilizing their local communities and property values.

DIVERSE HOUSING, DIVERSE SCHOOLING: HOW POLICY CAN STABILIZE RACIAL DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN CITIES AND SUBURBS

Introduction

The close relationship between housing and schools has been a major cause of inequality throughout American history. The decentralized and locally controlled nature of the U.S. public education system creates a situation in which zip codes determine children's educational opportunities. The difference in these opportunities across district and school boundaries is strongly correlated with race and embedded in ongoing residential segregation. The long-term result of racially segregated neighborhoods and local public schools is that millions of Black, Latino and sometimes Asian students lack access to decent school facilities, highly trained teachers, challenging curricula, and the most reputable schools.¹ These disparate conditions across schools and districts in turn provide justifications for White families to purchase homes in predominantly White neighborhoods, continuing the vicious cycle of race, boundary lines and "good" versus "bad" communities and schools.

In recent years, this "housing-school nexus" of racial segregation and inequality has become even more salient as the demographics of the country are changing rapidly and thousands of suburban and urban neighborhoods are going through major racial transitions as more Blacks, Latinos and Asians move to the suburbs and more Whites migrate back to the cities their parents and grandparents fled decades ago.² Meanwhile, the policies that have been most successful at disrupting the racialized housing-school nexus, especially school desegregation plans, are being dismantled³. They have been replaced with supposedly "colorblind" school choice options, such as charter schools, that exacerbate racial segregation due to their lack of student transportation and failure to comply with racial balancing guidelines.⁴

A growing number of scholars, policymakers and advocates in the areas of housing and education have raised our awareness of the need to address the relationship between housing and schools particularly in communities going through demographic change – both gentrifying urban neighborhoods and formerly all-White suburbs like Ferguson, Missouri. The goal is to prevent massive White flight from suburbs as they grow more diverse or rapid displacement of families of color from gentrifying urban neighborhoods. But stabilizing racially diverse communities and their public schools as urban-suburban migrations are occurring is hard work, requiring progressive and carefully coordinated housing and education policies.⁵ While several municipalities – both urban and suburban – are working on these strategies, they need more support from federal and state policymakers.⁶

In this policy brief, I review the social science evidence on the housing-school nexus, highlighting the problem of reoccurring racial segregation and inequality absent strong, proactive Federal or State integration policies. I also review the relevant research on housing and school choice to reveal that the problem of resegregation is far more complicated than any tangible, measurable distinctions between schools and neighborhoods on across the racial dividing line.

In fact, a growing body of research now suggests that White homebuyers' choices are based on their "*perception of place*," or a set of implicit biases, or assumptions about the *quality* of a community and its schools that are not always accurate in terms of objective measures of tangible factors – e.g. quality of housing, academic outcomes – but are almost always strongly related to race. The term "implicit bias," which examines how "relatively unconscious and relatively automatic features of prejudiced judgment" affect social behavior,⁷ is increasingly used in the legal field, particularly in the criminal justice literature, and in popular press reports on racial profiling and police brutality in recent years. And while the implicit bias concept has not, prior to this policy brief, been systematically connected to the research on school and housing choice, I argue that it often results in White homebuyers devaluing houses and schools in communities that are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse even, when there are no tangible differences between those places and others with more White residents. Recent research, described below, confirms that Whites' perceptions of communities and schools that are in the process of changing from predominantly White to more demographically diverse are more negative than would be justified by purely tangible or measurable factors related to housing, neighborhood or school quality.⁸ Based on these findings, I argue that the implicit bias framework can be extremely helpful to educational researchers studying school and housing choices.

In this brief, I sometimes use the term "implicit assumptions" instead of "implicit biases" when talking about homebuyers' choices of schools and communities and how they relate to race. I do this because the term "assumption" – or something accepted without proof as true or certain to happen – seems to better fit the data my research team and I collected for a recent study of the housing-school nexus on Long Island than did the term "bias" – or the unfair prejudice in favor of or against a thing, person, or group. In fact, my research showed that the veracity of homebuyers' perceived *truth and certainty* about the quality of one community and its schools versus another with little or no "proof" suggest that bias-fed *assumptions* are at play. In fact, parents' perceptions of public schools in particular and the implicit race-related assumptions they make about the quality of those schools explain the so-called "intangible" factors of education – e.g. the reputation and status of a school – that the Supreme Court noted as important in *Brown v. Board of Education*.⁹

In the last two sections of this brief, I contextualize the need for more research, advocacy and policymaking to address the housing-school nexus in an era of rapidly changing demographics and urban-suburban metro migrations. I also provide recommendations to address the housing-school nexus.

Review of Research: Housing Choices/School Choices

In examining social science research relevant to the housing-school nexus, I identified three key topics or issues:

1. The nature of the housing-school nexus;
2. The impact of school desegregation and housing integration policies on the nexus;
3. The connection between the "perceptions of place" and implicit racial biases literature to research on school and housing choices.

Taken together these three overlapping bodies of research point us toward new directions for addressing racial segregation in housing and schools in the 21st Century.

The Nature of the Housing-School Nexus

With the exception of the approximately 10 percent of students who attend private schools and the more than 16 percent of students who are enrolled in public schools of choice, including magnets, charter schools and open-enrollment schools, the vast majority of elementary and secondary school students – about 73 percent – still attend their local, neighborhood public schools. Schools are tethered to housing patterns, especially elementary schools, which have smaller attendance zones.¹⁰

While housing markets are dependent on many non-school-related factors, including local municipal boundaries and zoning laws as well as the private actions of realtors and mortgage lenders,¹¹ the correlation between property values and the reputation of the local school district is generally strong.¹²

The Federal courts have understood this tight relationship and have cited the housing-school nexus as the principal cause of public school segregation, even if justices differ over the implications of the nexus for legal remedies. For instance, in a 1974 ruling in, *Milliken v. Bradley*, the Supreme Court cited the housing-school nexus as a reason why suburban school districts were not constitutionally obligated to participate in a metropolitan-area-wide desegregation plan. In that ruling, the Court stated: “The principal cause of racial and ethnic imbalance in urban public schools across the country - North and South - is the imbalance in residential patterns. Such residential patterns are typically beyond the control of school authorities.”¹³

Other federal judges, however, have cited the housing-school nexus as a rationale for ordering a school desegregation plan. For instance, in the landmark *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* school desegregation case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the school district was guilty of deliberately segregating Black and White students by drawing school attendance boundaries based on segregated residential patterns. In addition, the district had closed schools in neighborhoods that were becoming racially mixed and built new schools in the areas of White suburban expansion farthest from black neighborhoods. “Such a policy,” the Court noted, “does more than simply influence the short-run composition of the student body of a new school. It may well promote segregated residential patterns which, when combined with ‘neighborhood zoning’, further lock the school system into the mold of separation of the races”¹⁴

Similarly, in the case of *Austin Independent School District v. the United States*, the Fifth Circuit noted that segregated neighborhoods inevitably lead to segregated schools. Therefore, the Court ruled, school authorities could not constitutionally use a neighborhood assignment policy, which would infer a segregative intent.¹⁵

Although federal judges disagree on the causal direction of the nexus, researchers have more consistently argued that the relationship between housing and school segregation is mutually reinforcing.¹⁶ One way researchers have examined this dual-directional, or iterative, relationship is by looking at how it differs across place and race. For instance, we know from the extant literature that the housing-school nexus varies based on the region of the country and the racial/ethnic group of the students. Within these variations, we see evidence that

racial segregation is generated not only by housing patterns but also by the public school boundaries and enrollments.

For instance, Ong and Rickles find that in some regions of the U.S. school segregation levels are lower than housing segregation levels, but that is not always the case. Thus, in metropolitan areas where students are concentrated in a few, larger school districts as opposed to being dispersed across many smaller districts, the levels of school segregation are lower than the residential levels. But in metro areas with geographically small and divided school districts, the opposite is true.¹⁷ This makes sense given Bischoff's research on the strong, positive correlation between fragmentation of political units such as school districts and racial segregation.¹⁸

Researchers have also discovered that the housing-school nexus varies according to which racial/ethnic groups are involved, with African Americans more segregated in housing *and* schools overall than are Hispanic and Asian-Pacific Islander students. But this pattern also varies by region.¹⁹ For instance, African-Americans are more segregated in housing than schools in areas of the country, especially in the south, where school districts tend to be large, county-wide districts and where court orders mandating school desegregation were more likely to have been implemented.²⁰ The opposite is true for Hispanic students, who tend to be more segregated in schools than in housing. Meanwhile, the relationship between housing and school segregation is less strong for Asian and Pacific Islander students, for whom the correlation decreased significantly between 1990 and 2000.²¹ Still since the dismantling of many school desegregation plans in the late 1990s and early 2000s, school segregation has increased at a greater rate than residential segregation for African-American children, while for Asian-Pacific Islander and Hispanic children, the opposite is true.²²

The Mutually Reinforcing Process of Housing and School “Values”

Despite these variations in the housing-school nexus across place and race, it is quite clear that across contexts, this relationship flows in both directions, as property values affect tangible factors in schools and schools have an impact on property values. Thus, the housing-school nexus as it intersects with highly segregated and divided communities is problematic on several levels. Because more than 40 percent of public school funding, on average, comes from local property tax revenue, there are obvious tangible inequities related to variations in property values and property taxes.²³

At the same time, schools clearly have an impact on housing and property values. Evidence of this relationship has evolved over time as researchers have begun to look more closely at the role that school attendance zones and school district boundaries play in home prices. As Dougherty et al. note, initial (pre-1960s) research on home prices focused on characteristics of the houses themselves and their location with little attention to social context, including public schools. Over time, economists began to factor in the impact of public schools on housing prices by examining district-level variables such as per pupil expenditures. Once the school accountability movement gained momentum in the late 1970s with minimum competency testing, “input” variables such as per pupil spending were replaced with “outcome” variables of school-level performance, including standardized test scores.²⁴

In the last two decades, researchers have explored additional, more methodologically advanced ways of measuring school effects on neighborhoods.²⁵ This more recent research, which uses a geographic-based methodology to examine similar houses in similar neigh-

neighborhoods but in different school districts and attendance areas, reveals the more subtle relationship between student demographics and home prices. When this analysis – known as boundary discontinuity or fixed-boundary effects – is conducted, researchers find that the racial makeup of schools and districts do affect housing prices, meaning that black student enrollment in the public schools is negatively correlated with property values on similar houses in similar neighborhoods, even after controlling for other variables such as test scores.²⁶

For instance, one study examined the impact of elementary school test scores and racial composition on homebuyers' willingness to purchase single-family homes in suburban West Hartford, CT, over a 10-year period (1996-2005) in which state test score and student enrollment data were becoming more readily accessible. During this period, West Hartford's school and residential demographics were changing rapidly from predominantly White to more Black and Latino. The main finding was that while West Hartford homebuyers were sensitive to both test scores and school racial composition, the latter had nearly seven times more influence during the post-2001 period, as the district was becoming more racially diverse and the elementary schools were becoming more demographically lopsided, with several nearly all-White schools in a district that was about one-third Black and Latino. The authors conclude that "not all data are equal in the eyes of parents" and the racial makeup of their children's classmates seemed to matter even more than their test results.²⁷

The significance of the racial makeup of schools and districts was similarly underscored in my research team's more recent study of the relationship between housing characteristics, school outcome data, and student racial composition across 56 school district boundaries in one Northeastern suburban county. This county, like many suburban counties, is experiencing rapid demographic shifts as growing numbers of the Black, Latino and Asian residents move in from the adjacent city. Meanwhile, racial segregation *between* the geographically small school districts within this county remains high. In fact, with roughly 95 percent of the racial segregation in this County occurs *between* separate and unequal rather than *within* the school district boundaries. In other words, nearly all the students who attend racially segregated schools in this County do so because they are separated from students of other races and ethnic groups by district boundaries, and not merely school attendance zones within one district. Meanwhile, after the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in the *Milliken v. Bradley* case, this form of between-district segregation is much more difficult to address.²⁸

To fully appreciate how these demographic shifts and the resulting racial segregation intersect with the "value" that homebuyers place on houses across boundary lines in this county, we analyzed the final sale price for every home sold between 2007 and 2010. With detailed data on the "quality" of each home sold -- the size of the lot and the house, including bedrooms and bathrooms, and characteristics of the construction, such as wood versus vinyl siding, etc. -- we mapped each of these recently sold houses onto school district boundaries.

Unsurprisingly, school district racial/ethnic composition was also tightly linked to other characteristics, with high-minority districts enrolling larger proportions of both ESL and poor students and reporting significantly lower test scores and post-secondary schooling. In addition, the housing bubble and the mortgage lending crisis of 2007-8 created more volatility in home prices in the predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods. Still, controlling for all of these variables, prices for similar homes in similar neighborhoods on different sides – barely – of school district boundary lines were negatively correlated to school district racial/ethnic composition. In fact, similar homes differed almost \$50,000 in price when one is located in a district that is 30 percent Black/Hispanic and the other in a 70 percent Black/

Hispanic district.²⁹ In this way, racial/ethnic segregation results in the devaluation of homes in districts with high percentages of Black and Hispanic students. This devaluation leads to lower property tax revenue, even when the *rate* of taxation is high, leading to the self-fulfilling prophecy of “bad” schools, “bad” neighborhoods, and “bad” students.³⁰

This recent research suggests that efforts to address “tangible” factors – e.g. home and neighborhood quality or school outcome data -- that can affect property values and the reputations of schools and communities is not enough. Race matters in homebuyers’ perception of place and thus how much they will pay to live on either side of a school district boundary line.

The Harms of Segregation in Both Housing and Schools

Some may argue that White homebuyers wanting to live in more homogeneous communities would not be so problematic if funding and resources were more equal. But there is ample evidence to help us understand why separate is not equal in housing or schools. In fact, in addition to the large body of research documenting the harms caused by racial segregation in public education, more researchers are examining these harms in a contextual manner that highlights the housing-school nexus.³¹

For instance, the “geography of opportunity” is an interdisciplinary framework which elucidates the various harms caused by segregation in housing and schools by defining “opportunity” in its spatial dimension and in relation to access to high-quality education, affordable housing and transportation, adequate health services, and good-paying jobs.³² The fundamental argument is that opportunity is unevenly distributed geographically across metropolitan areas, leaving residents in different communities with differential levels of exposure to risks (e.g., crime, environmental pollutants) and access to resources (e.g., good schools, green spaces). These uneven geographies of opportunity result from developers and policymakers disinvesting in some areas and reinvesting in others. Not coincidentally, this uneven development is highly racialized, with Black and Hispanic families and their communities and schools usually faring the worst. This process of spatially differentiated investment means that ongoing racial segregation perpetuates the disadvantages of growing up and going to school in poor, African-American and Latino communities, which in turn perpetuates persistent residential segregation.³³

Educational researchers have highlighted the multiple ways in which residential segregation, coupled with the fragmented housing markets, exacerbate racial and socioeconomic differences between schools across attendance boundaries.³⁴ A good illustration of this comes from a study of New York City public housing residents’ access to public schools. The researchers found that children in public housing did not have the same educational opportunities as those from other households, even households with similar income levels.³⁵

Thus, the housing-school nexus as it intersects with highly segregated and divided communities, is challenging on several levels. For instance, because more than 40 percent of public school funding, on average, comes from local property tax revenue, there are obvious tangible inequities between poor and affluent communities. Although court-ordered finance-equity formulas can lessen the effect of this correlation to some extent by requiring states to give more funds to schools in low-income communities, there are ample ways in which private resources augment public funds.³⁶

For instance, Wells et al. found in their study of suburban school districts (described above) that the housing-school nexus is multi-layered and goes far beyond easily measured tangible factors such as per-pupil funding. We found that while additional per-pupil funding would be helpful for schools in low-income communities, it was the *private resources* concentrated in these communities that multiplied the harms of segregation and inequality across school districts. They document the private fundraising that takes place in more affluent communities, providing money used by public schools to fund everything from new athletic fields to impressive art and design programs.³⁷

In addition to these tangible factors, which can be purchased, my co-authors and I found that racially segregated schools and communities fostered highly separate and unequal educational opportunities via their distinct “academic press,” with the high-pressure affluent schools having advanced curriculum while teachers in schools in lower-income communities spend many days preparing students for state tests. In other words, in low-income school districts, in which test scores are consistently low, educators resort to teaching to the test to try to improve the scores. In segregated, more affluent communities where test scores are well above the norm, there is little to no test prep taking place. These differences across communities shaped the separate school environments in terms of what the students experienced but also what they came to expect for themselves in terms of their lives after high school. Finally, the researchers found that the political dimensions of inequality across school district boundaries were also great, with public institutions being far more responsive to economically advantaged constituents. This inter-district research, therefore, emphasizes how educational inequality is intertwined with the *separateness* of small school districts across boundary lines.³⁸

Related work on the housing-school nexus highlights the negative long-term and intergenerational effect of segregated schools and neighborhoods. In a review of research on the housing-school nexus, for instance, Mickelson concludes that segregated public schools and neighborhoods are highly effective delivery systems for unequal educational opportunities. She cites the “synergistic nature” of the relationship between segregated housing and schools as not only reciprocal in that one leads to the other, but also intergenerational because graduates of segregated schools lack the networks and interracial exposure to help them find employment and housing outside of racially isolated neighborhoods.³⁹

Further evidence of the long-term impact of the housing-school nexus on children’s later choices in adulthood about neighborhoods comes from a study by Braddock and Gonzalez on the relationship between racial isolation in schools and neighborhoods, which suggests that school-level isolation plays a more significant role than neighborhood isolation in diminishing the prospects for cross-racial social cohesion among young adults, although both matter.⁴⁰

The Impact of School Desegregation and Housing Integration Policies on the Nexus

The vast majority of the research on the impact of housing and/or school desegregation policies on racial segregation suggest that these programs, if implemented correctly, can disrupt the housing-school nexus of racial segregation. The problem is that the era of court-ordered school-desegregation programs is over, leaving a far smaller number of plans in place than in the 1970s and 80s. Meanwhile housing-integration policies have never been as pervasive or as effective as school desegregation plans.⁴¹

School Desegregation Policy and the Housing-School Nexus

In the 1970s, sociologist James Coleman argued that urban school-desegregation policies were a main cause of White flight from cities, thereby contributing to housing segregation.⁴² This claim was refuted by several researchers who pointed out that White flight also occurred in cities with no school desegregation plans and that multiple other non-school factors, as well as the size of school districts and the scope of school desegregation plans, affected the ubiquitous White flight.⁴³ According to Farley, Richards and Wurdock, when comparing the rate of White flight across different cities over time, “school integration programs have had little effect on either levels of White enrollment or the racial composition of the school district.”⁴⁴

Despite robust research evidence to the contrary, the idea that school desegregation caused Whites to leave urban neighborhoods is widely asserted to this day as the “common sense” understanding of what occurred.

This common understanding is all the more ironic given the evidence that school desegregation policy more often had the opposite effect. Thus, even though school desegregation plans are being dismantled, it is worth highlighting key findings on the impact of those policies to demonstrate the malleability of the housing-school nexus.

For instance, several studies concluded that school-desegregation plans in the south, where most school districts and therefore their desegregation policies were county-wide, were most effective in severing the connection between residential and school segregation. Some studies also found that when school-desegregation plans were designed to allow families living in racially diverse neighborhoods to send their children to their local schools while parents living in segregated neighborhoods had their children reassigned and “bused” to a far-away school, the school desegregation policy fostered housing integration. In other words, parents who were opposed to having their children going to a school far from home for integration purposes only needed to move into a neighborhood that was diverse to such reassignment.⁴⁵

Furthermore, there is long-term evidence that graduates of desegregated schools are much more willing to live in racially diverse neighborhoods and more comfortable sending their own children to integrated schools.⁴⁶ Finally, more recent post-school-desegregation research has shown the rise in school segregation levels that relate directly to ongoing housing segregation, particularly for African-Americans, who live in the most segregated communities. For instance, Reardon and Yun found that in the 1990s public school segregation increased for Black and Hispanic students while residential segregation declined slightly. The authors attribute this difference to the end of school desegregation policies that ameliorated the effect of residential segregation on students’ segregation levels.⁴⁷ Similarly, Frankenberg found increases in levels of school segregation, leading to a tightening of the housing-school nexus toward mutual segregation after the end of a decades-long school desegregation policy that had ameliorated the negative impact of segregated housing on school segregation levels.⁴⁸

These findings relate to another powerful theme in the literature, namely that school desegregation policy can only accomplish so much on its own in the absence of systematic efforts to address housing integration.⁴⁹ According to Ong and Rickles, “While, arguably, not the best long-term policy option, school busing has been the most direct mechanism to sever the connection between residential and school segregation.”⁵⁰

Housing Integration Policies and Their Effect on the Housing-School Nexus

Indeed, further evidence of the power of the housing-school nexus is found in research indicating that when done correctly, housing integration can have many positive effects on schools and on student outcomes. A widely cited study on this issue is Schwartz's research on Montgomery County, Maryland's 40-year-old inclusionary zoning policy, which allows low-income families access to low-poverty neighborhoods and schools.⁵¹

Her analysis shows that when the most disadvantaged students gain access to the district's least-poor neighborhoods and schools they begin to catch up to their non-poor, high-performing peers. The fact that poor families are randomly assigned to affordable housing and therefore the students are randomly assigned to their schools makes these findings more impressive. Schwartz notes that while the main goal of the program was to allow low- or moderate-income residents to live near where they work, the educational effects have been substantial: "Although the county's inclusionary zoning policy occurs outside the school walls, it has had a powerful educational impact."⁵²

Meanwhile, a federal housing voucher policy designed to move more low-income families from the poorest communities to less-poor ones, Moving to Opportunity (MTO), has produced more mixed educational results. MTO was based on the Chicago's court-ordered Gautreaux program, which enabled low-income, mostly black families to leave high-poverty public housing for private apartments in more affluent areas of the city and its suburbs. Research on Gautreaux's suburban movers in mostly White, middle-income communities, found that the move out of poor neighborhoods and schools had a strong positive effect on these families, including on their students' school achievement levels and educational outcomes.⁵³

The results were less consistent for the MTO program, which was launched in the mid-1990s in five cities – Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and New York. The main problem with MTO is that eligible families often were not able to move into substantially less poor communities. This meant that in most cases, the children remained in highly segregated and mostly poor schools.⁵⁴

But when DeLuca and Rosenblat examined a related assisted-mobility program, where poor families (former and current public housing residents or those on the waiting list for housing assistance) receive subsidies and counseling to relocate to less poor and more opportunity-rich communities, they found that low-income families enjoyed meaningful changes in educational opportunity as a function of moving to better-performing school districts. They found, for example, that the Baltimore Housing Mobility program provides families with access to schools with more than double the number of qualified teachers, less than half the poverty rates, and significantly better academic performance than the schools they attended before entering the program.⁵⁵

Still, any positive effect produced by more integrated housing and communities has been offset by the trend of students enrolling in non-neighborhood schools – either private or public schools of choice. Indeed, Sahoni and Sparito conclude that increases in student enrollment in non-neighborhood schools raises the levels of racial segregation in public schools. This finding supports the argument that just as school desegregation policy cannot completely solve issues of racial segregation in the absence of a complementary housing policy, it may also be the case that housing integration alone is not enough if parents do not choose to enroll their children in neighborhood public schools that reflect their neighborhood's diversity.⁵⁶

“Perceptions of Place” and Implicit Racial Biases in School and Housing Choices

The last body of research reviewed should help policymakers consider new and different ways to address ongoing housing and school segregation and determine where to intervene to address either or both at the same time. Given recent trends ending the era of school desegregation and the movement of more students into non-neighborhood schools, new student-assignment policies must be developed to produce more racial integration. I argue that the “hearts and minds” of parents – particularly those who have access to more diverse public schools -- must change as well.

While opinion poll data suggest that a growing number of parents say they are in favor of sending their children to racially and ethnically diverse schools,⁵⁷ we see in the research that more affluent, White and well-educated parents focus increasingly on what their peers think about schools. Perceptions of place and the word-of-mouth reputation of a school – as constructed by peers of similar status – matter a great deal to parents when they are choosing schools and homes. From Holme’s⁵⁸ research on choosing homes and choosing schools to more recent studies of parental choice of schools and of programs within schools,⁵⁹ we have seen mounting evidence that school quality is constructed by social groups. We also see that these groups of parents construct these school meanings via racially segregated social networks and thus, their evaluation of school quality is highly correlated with race despite what less subjective measures of these schools indicate. As a result of these socially constructed understandings of school quality, research finds that when given the choice, even those parents who say they want diverse schools for their children often choose racially segregated schools due to this constructed understanding of which schools are “good.”⁶⁰

In the recent research on 56 suburban school districts on Long Island discussed above, Wells et al. learned through a mixed-methods approach that *who* live in a community and send their children to the public schools matters more than any tangible measures of school quality when parents with multiple options are choosing where to move. Through the statistical analyses of property values, demographics, and school outcome data, we found that the racial makeup of the public schools is more important to homebuyers than the quality of housing or test scores. When race matters more than “tangible” factors in the school and housing choice process, the “intangible” definitions of “good” and “bad” schools works against racial integration.

As noted above, the analysis of property values of nearly identical homes across school-district boundaries suggests negative associations between school district racial/ethnic composition and home values, even after accounting for a wide array of covariates, including household income. At the same time, the survey and interview data suggest that for many White home buyers, while increasingly Asian communities and schools are not valued as highly as the predominantly White districts, they fare much better in terms of status compared to the predominantly Black and Latino districts.

In fact, in our Long Island study, this higher rate of acceptability of Asian versus Black or Latino neighbors on the part of White homebuyers was corroborated by the survey data showing that respondents who move into predominantly White (or increasingly Asian) school districts place more importance on the “intangible” – e.g. reputation and status factors – of a community and school district. In other words, there is a strong relationship between the racial makeup of the students in a respondent’s school district of “choice” and the degree to which he or she was persuaded to move to that district based on what other people

said about the quality of the schools. There was no significant difference in this relationship depending on respondents' self-ranking in terms of politics, nor on whether they rent or own their current residence.⁶¹

What seems to matter most for those survey respondents who purchase homes in more affluent and White or White and Asian school districts is the reputation of the community and the schools. For instance, respondents who bought homes in both the predominantly White and combined White and Asian school districts place significantly more emphasis on *where* the house is located as opposed to the house itself. Indeed, the difference in the importance placed on “intangible” factors, including the reputation of a district, the recommendation of a friend or family member, and the “word-of-mouth” understanding or social construction of district desirability is the greatest distinction found in the final survey analysis.

But the higher value of homes in the districts into which high-achieving Asian students are moving has its limits. For instance, one suburban district with an influx of Asian families is highly ranked in terms of student outcomes, but the property values are not as high as they are in a nearby predominantly White district with lower test scores. An Asian mother with children in this district compared the local real estate market to that of a neighboring school district. She quoted a \$200,000 price difference between two similar houses on different sides of a boundary between two school districts, despite her evidence that the neighboring district's curriculum and grading standards were inferior to those of her children's schools. This mother noted that that houses in this less rigorous but more affluent and more “White” school district are worth more because of who lives there.

Thus, the survey findings, quantitative analysis and interview data all conclude that those who move into predominantly White or White and Asian school districts place greater importance on the “reputation” and “perception” of a school district, which in turn is highly correlated with White and Asian student demographics. Furthermore, in an iterative manner, the reputation of a school district is tightly connected to the monetary value of homes within that district, leading to a vicious cycle of segregation and inequality.⁶²

Similarly, in an older study of Long Island, residents of two kinds of suburban neighborhoods were asked to sort 84 communities into groups of similar places. Their perceptions of community similarities were found to be associated with community socioeconomic status, racial composition, population age, and housing density.⁶³

Implicit Biases of School Choice

Unfortunately, this research on the perceptions of schools as they relate to race has not been thus far, tightly connected to the social psychological research on “implicit bias,” or the relatively unconscious, automatic features of prejudiced assessments. When applied to attitudes toward members of socially stigmatized racial/ethnic groups, this social psychological theory can help Whites understand why, despite their egalitarian beliefs, they might nevertheless implicitly associate Blacks with laziness or Hispanics with dishonesty and better understand how this might lead them to behave in any number of biased ways, such as hiring a less qualified White man over a more qualified White.⁶⁴

As noted in the introduction, despite the increased attention paid to “implicit biases” in discussions of recent police killings of unarmed black men, there have been too few connections made between implicit biases and education, save for a small body of research on school

discipline. This is unfortunate, because the implicit bias framework can help educational researchers make sense of school and housing choices in profound ways. Research on parents' perceptions of place and race as they affect school choices and on the implicit biases inherent in these choices helps us recognize the "intangible" factors – e.g. the reputation and status of a school – that the Supreme Court cited in *Brown* as one of the harms done by racial segregation. When these intangible factors, which constitute the social construction of a community and its schools – e.g., perception of place – are grounded in implicit racial biases, they work against efforts to create and sustain diverse schools and communities. Implicit bias, therefore, is a key factor in the housing-school nexus of racial segregation, and it's time to address it.

Recent Developments: Metro Migration Patterns & "De Facto" Diverse Communities and Schools

Based on the research evidence reviewed above, I argue that finding new, 21st-Century mechanisms to sustain diverse communities and schools is more critical today than ever, given the rolling back of race-conscious policies such as school desegregation, the changing demographics of the K-12 population, and metro migrations patterns, all creating "de facto" diverse and highly unstable communities.

In 2014, for the first time in our nation's history, the majority of K-12 public school student population were students of color and the majority were low-income.⁶⁵ The simultaneous movement of blacks and Latinos to the suburbs and Whites into gentrifying areas of the cities – a metro migration pattern that some have called the "great inversion" – presents new possibilities for achieving racially and economically integrated public schools.⁶⁶

Beginning in the 1990s a new era of metro migrations began, which led to a process we refer to as "trading places" across racial lines. As more black and recent immigrants move into the once all-White suburbs, a growing number of upper-middle class and relatively affluent Whites are moving back into urban centers.⁶⁷ As Ehrenhalt notes, cities and suburbs have experienced a "demographic inversion" as a result of their changing racial composition.⁶⁸

This current, "trading places" phase of metro migrations did not happen by accident. Just as federal policies after WWII enabled White families to flee the cities while keeping many people of color out of the suburbs, several federal policies in the last two decades have encouraged lower-income black and Latino families to buy houses in the suburbs.⁶⁹ Starting in the late 1980s, federal policies simultaneously supported a new form of "urban renewal," displacing millions of poor urban families, while offering/promoting greater homeownership for those families -- including many blacks and Latinos – which subsequently moved into the suburbs. Furthermore, as urban gentrification has accelerated in recent years, more black, Latino and Asian families have been displaced – pushed out of the cities they called home for many years – by the rising cost of housing.⁷⁰ In fact, by 2006 the number of people living below the federal poverty line was greater in the suburbs than the cities.⁷¹

Overall, these fluctuating metropolitan characteristics suggest that the traditional paradigms of "cities" versus "suburbs" – and who lives where -- are rapidly evolving in ways that we cannot yet completely understand. But urban history suggests that when a racial group begins migrating to a community, the existing population is likely either to be pushed out

or to flee, setting into play a perpetual cycle of segregation and resegregation. Furthermore, gentrification of once all-Black and all-Latino neighborhoods is not just about housing; local public schools are also profoundly affected. Dozens of public schools in New York City that only ten years ago were almost entirely minority and low-income are becoming or have already become predominantly White and affluent. Low-income families are being “displaced” from neighborhoods *and* public schools just as they become more opportunity-rich.

The irony is that we know from our scholarly research that White gentrifiers state that they choose the city over the suburbs in order to raise their children in more multicultural communities and enroll them in racially and socioeconomically diverse schools. But if current housing trends continue, urban schools in certain gentrifying pockets will come to more closely resemble suburban schools circa the 1960s.

In a 2014 report, the U.N Committee on Ending Racial Discrimination admonished the U.S. government for taking few meaningful steps to reduce racial segregation. Even as the US has grown more diverse, the report noted, segregation has persisted and continues to exclude members of minority groups from adequate education, employment, health care and other resources.⁷² Indeed, without proactive policies to address racial segregation in both communities and schools as populations shift, the old pattern of separate and unequal will reoccur as lower-income people of color are displaced from increasingly expensive gentrifying urban enclaves and Whites continue to flee suburbs experiencing an influx of Blacks and Latinos.

Recommendations and Policy Implications

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 as neighborhood demographics change. This process eventually leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy of “good” and “bad” schools that is strongly correlated with race. 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 embrace and capitalize on changing racial attitudes in the U.S., particularly among the younger generations, to promote and stabilize diverse communities and public schools.

Despite the combination of policy trends and individual choices that have led to ongoing patterns of segregation in both urban and suburban communities, a growing body of literature indicates that a substantial proportion of our supposedly “post-racial” society strongly values and desires exposure to diverse environments as an asset - both within and outside of schools.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

Policymakers must consider how current accountability policies in the field of education exacerbate segregation and inequality.

Fair-housing advocates have increasingly 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.⁷⁵ 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 in the new American suburbia.

Within racially diverse schools, educators and parents need to push back against policies and rankings that focus primarily on standardized test scores to define “good” schools. Such narrow measures often devalue suburban 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 better prepare children for culturally complex colleges and work environments. Such educational factors should be “valued” in the real estate market and in societal definitions of “good” schools.

Addressing implicit bias: 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 locals 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 part of town or neighborhood elementary school becomes less “desirable” than another.

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 Hispanics moved in, 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 much support diversity in rapidly changing neighborhoods. As more white and affluent parents move in to the communities their grandparents fled after WWII, 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 21st Century. The future of our increasingly diverse country requires policymakers and leaders, from DC to the state capitols to the local town councils and school boards, to take action.

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