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Seeing Past the “Colorblind” Myth of Education Policy

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SEEING PAST THE “COLORBLIND” MYTH OF EDUCATION POLICY

ADDRESSING RACIAL AND ETHNIC INEQUALITY
AND SUPPORTING CULTURALLY DIVERSE SCHOOLS

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SEEING PAST THE “COLORBLIND” MYTH OF EDUCATION POLICY

ADDRESSING RACIAL AND ETHNIC INEQUALITY AND SUPPORTING CULTURALLY DIVERSE SCHOOLS

Amy Stuart Wells, Teachers College, Columbia University

Executive Summary

This policy brief presents the most significant evidence-based critique of ostensibly “colorblind” education policies by highlighting their relationship to past and present racial/ethnic inequality and their failure to address the rapidly changing demographics of our school-age population, which could be considered an asset if we were not “blind” to it. I argue that even when education policies are “colorblind” on the surface, they interact with school systems and residential patterns in which race is a central factor in deciding where students go to school, what resources and curricula they have access to, whether they are understood and appreciated by their teachers and classmates, and how they are categorized across academic programs. Such policies are also at odds with a multi-racial and ethnic society in which a growing number of parents and educators see the potential educational benefits of paying attention to diversity and difference as a pedagogical tool.

This policy brief is based upon my review of a large body of interdisciplinary research that exposes how factors such as housing markets, school district boundaries, and accountability systems are actually far from colorblind in their impact on the public education system. As a result, efforts to ignore race via “colorblind” or race-neutrality policies such as school choice or accountability systems can easily replicate rather than address age-old patterns of inequality grounded in a history of race consciousness.¹

For example, the two central education reforms of the last few decades—the standards/accountability movement and free-market school choice policies—have been framed as outcome-based solutions to the racial achievement gap without directly addressing any societal or educational issues related to race. These reforms were launched in response to the reported lackluster performance of U.S. public schools at the end of the Civil Rights era. Ironically, several of the education policies passed during that era directly addressed racial inequality and coincided with the largest reductions in the Black-White achievement gap in the nation’s history.

Within this current so-called “colorblind” or “post-racial” era, the accountability and school choice reforms have gained broad-based bipartisan support amid a notable

indifference to the changing racial makeup of the overall public school student population, now only 52% White, non-Hispanic. Meanwhile, there is mounting evidence to suggest that so-called “colorblind” accountability and school choice policies, premised on narrow definitions of school quality and absent interventions to support teaching and learning in racially diverse public schools, exacerbate racial and social class segregation and inequality. The implication of this research should inform efforts to close achievement gaps defined by race. But this will only happen if policymakers are not blind to the role that race plays in our educational system.

We are at a critical crossroads in American history—a breaking point at which efforts to ignore race will clash with the racial and cultural complexity of our day-to-day lives. *Hence, I recommend that policymakers address race-conscious policies, practices and conditions that perpetuate segregation and inequality while simultaneously tapping into the changing racial attitudes of Americans by supporting racially diverse schools.*

Policy Recommendation No. 1: Creating and Sustaining More Racially and Ethnically Diverse Schools

- **Support and Sustain Diverse Districts and Communities.** National, state and local policymakers must take a hard look at the demographic future of this country and recognize the value of supporting a growing number of racially and ethnically diverse schools, districts and communities. Providing strict guidelines and incentives for local zoning boards, developers and real estate agents to promote and sustain communities with a mix of incomes, ethnicities, and cultures can be done in conjunction with fair housing policies and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) effort to “Build Integrated and Sustainable Communities.”
- **Fostering Cross-District Cooperation/Collaboration.** State and County policymakers should expand upon the current cross-district special education or vocational education collaborations across school district boundaries. Indeed, more state and county governments could promote meaningful magnet-like programs to attract students with shared interests from across district boundaries. States could provide incentives for fragmented, small school districts to cooperate in the development of county-wide magnet schools.
- **Encouraging Inter-district Transfers to Promote Diversity.** More states should amend their existing open-enrollment school choice laws to promote diversity instead of segregation, which most of the current laws do. Simple guidelines could help lessen the segregative impact of these student transfer plans. Support for transferring students in the form of outreach, recruitment, a formal application process, and free transportation across district lines would enable these plans to foster greater racial diversity and less racial segregation.

Policy Recommendation No. 2: Supporting Curriculum, Teaching and Assessment that Taps into the Educational Benefits of Diversity

- **Expand Legal Challenges Based on the Educational Benefits of Diversity.** The federal courts have ruled that there is a compelling state interest in maintaining diversity in both higher education and K-12 contexts because of the educational benefits that can be derived in such contexts, including cross-racial understanding, livelier and better informed class discussions, and cross-cultural exposure that better prepares all students to succeed in an increasingly diverse society.²
- **Tapping into the Common Core’s Potential to Support the Educational Benefits of Diversity.** Although the mandated tests and teacher evaluation systems designed to measure student achievement have pushed the Common Core in the wrong direction, this reform, with its focus on deeper learning and critical citizenship, actually has far more “progressive potential” than is currently being realized.
- **Placing Far Less Emphasis on Standardized Tests.** The current colorblind policy focus on standardized testing as the almost exclusive measure of high-achieving students and good schools and teachers does an educational disservice to students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Much can be done in the policy arena to support and further the educational benefits of diversity. Such efforts will only progress, however, in a context in which people in power admit that they and their constituents can indeed *see color*. In fact, we know that seeing *is* believing in the potential of the most racially and ethnically diverse democracy in the world.

SEEING PAST THE “COLORBLIND” MYTH OF EDUCATION POLICY

ADDRESSING RACIAL AND ETHNIC INEQUALITY AND SUPPORTING CULTURALLY DIVERSE SCHOOLS

Introduction

During the last 30 years, education policymakers have supported a series of race-neutral or “colorblind” reforms in an effort to close achievement gaps clearly demarcated by race and ethnicity. Save for the provision in the federal No Child Left Behind law requiring districts to report test scores by racial/ethnic categories, most recent education policies do not mention race, diversity, or rapid demographic shifts in the public school population. The NCLB provision is, quite simply, a reflection of the most popular “colorblind” approach to addressing racial disparities in education: *Ignore stark racial inequality when implementing policies and then bemoan vivid racial inequalities in educational outcomes.*

Indeed, the two central educational reforms of the last few decades—the standards/accountability movement and free-market school choice policies—have both been framed as outcome-based solutions to the racial achievement gap without directly addressing any societal or educational issues related to race. These reforms were launched in response to the reported lackluster performance of U.S. public schools at the end of the Civil Rights era.

Ironically, several education policies passed during that era did directly address racial inequality and coincided with the largest reductions in the Black-White achievement gap in the nation’s history.³ But by the mid-1980s, these “equity-minded” Civil Rights policies were seen as overly regulatory and, even worse, a prominent cause of the faltering U.S. economy.⁴ This led to the “excellence” era in education, just as a “colorblind” ideology was expanding within conservative think tanks and among legal scholars who characterized policies such as affirmative action and school desegregation as unconstitutional and undemocratic.⁵

Within this current so-called “colorblind” or “post-racial” era, the accountability and school choice reforms have gained broad-based bipartisan support amid a notable indifference to the changing racial makeup of the overall public school student population, now only 52% White, non-Hispanic. Furthermore, these two central reforms, which are reshaping the landscape of public education today, have become increasingly intertwined and interdependent. As states have implemented new standards and tests to hold schools

accountable for student outcomes, almost all have adopted at least one or more forms of market-based school choice policy: either charter schools, open-enrollment programs, vouchers, or tuition tax credit policies.⁶ Federal laws and competitive programs have required, prodded, or supported these state accountability and school choice policies,⁷ shifting control over what students learn, how their learning is measured, and their access to schools into the private sphere of testing companies and school management firms. Through the private and increasingly for-profit institutions that implement choice and accountability reforms, our educational system defines the “success” and “failure” of schools primarily based upon purportedly “colorblind” tests designed to address racial inequality by enabling all students, regardless of race, to achieve high standards.⁸ While equalizing educational outcomes is an admirable goal, framing such efforts as if students’ racial, ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds do not matter in this process is problematic given our history of racial inequality and our understanding of the role of culture, which is highly non-standardized across (and within) racial/ethnic groups, in the way students learn.

In addition, these two reforms leave parents, students, educators, advocates, and community members with less say in how our public schools are run and what knowledge is valued. Perhaps it is more than just a colorblind coincidence that as the public school constituency has become less White and more impoverished due to growing income inequality and the resulting affluent flight, the schools themselves have become less public.

Overview of Brief

This policy brief presents the most significant evidence-based critique of ostensibly “colorblind” education policies by highlighting their relationship to both past and present racial/ethnic inequality in American society and their denial of the rapidly changing demographics of this country, which could be considered an asset if we were not “blind” to it. I argue that even when education policies are “colorblind” on the surface, they interact with a school system in which race is a central factor in deciding where students go to school, what resources and curricula they have access to, whether they are understood and appreciated by their teachers and classmates, and how they are categorized across academic programs. Such policies are also at odds with a multi-racial and ethnic society in which a growing number of parents and educators see the potential educational benefits of paying attention to diversity and difference as a pedagogical tool.

This policy brief is based upon a large body of interdisciplinary research that exposes how factors such as housing markets, school district boundaries, and accountability systems are actually far from colorblind in their impact on the public education system. As a result, efforts to ignore race via “colorblind” or race-neutrality policies can easily replicate rather than address age-old patterns of inequality grounded in a history of race consciousness.⁹

Furthermore, I argue that policymakers who ignore the rapid demographic changes within the K-12 population miss a critical opportunity to *lead* this increasingly diverse nation

toward a more equal and cohesive future. In fact, the research suggests that many voters would welcome more leadership in this area. Opinion poll and interview data show a growing number of parents *are* paying attention to our “demographic destiny” and seeking racially and culturally diverse public schools to prepare their children for a global society.¹⁰ Recent elections suggest a growing number of voters are looking for elected officials who can lead an increasingly diverse nation instead of denying our demographic destiny or worse, playing into the sort of racial politics that divides us.¹¹

We are at a critical crossroads in American history—a breaking point at which efforts to ignore race will clash with the racial and cultural complexity of our day-to-day lives. At the same time, awareness of growing income inequality in the U.S. and its relationship to race has fostered additional frustration with a so-called “colorblind meritocracy” that is clearly unmeritocratic in a racialized way.¹² Although the old, race-conscious education policies of yesteryear, especially court-ordered school desegregation, are clearly a thing of the past, there are ample ways that 21st Century policies can support the creation and sustainability of racially/ethnically diverse public schools to meet growing parental demand and move our increasingly culturally complicated nation forward. This support, however, must go beyond creating schools with diverse enrollments to curricular and accountability approaches that allow educators to tap into the multiple educational benefits of diversity. In the last decade, Federal courts have ruled that school districts and universities have a “compelling state interest” in maintaining diverse schools and classrooms in order to derive these educational benefits, but we lack the leadership in public education to make that a priority.¹³

Meanwhile, as I discuss in much detail below, there is mounting evidence to suggest that so-called “colorblind” accountability and school choice policies, premised on narrow definitions of school quality and absent interventions to support diversity, exacerbate racial and social class segregation and inequality. The implication of this research should inform efforts to close achievement gaps defined by race. But this will only happen if policymakers are not blind to the role that race plays in our educational system.

The History of “Colorblind” Ideology in a Color-Conscious Society

The argument that Americans should strive to be “colorblind” has a long history dating back to Reconstruction and debates over the 14th Amendment. In recent years, conservative legal scholars have argued that the Reconstruction Congress believed there should be no racial classification¹⁴ and that “colorblindness” is therefore an anti-racist view. This argument has framed contemporary court cases aimed at dismantling race-conscious policies such as affirmative action and school desegregation.¹⁵

According to Anderson, however, this colorblind framework constitutes a misreading of history, because both progressives and conservatives were in favor of race-conscious policies in the post-Civil War era. He documents, for example, how conservative Reconstruction Congressmen argued to exclude American Indians and Chinese immigrants from U.S. citizenship and equal protection under the 14th Amendment. Such proposals,

Anderson writes, were far from colorblind.¹⁶ At the same time, progressive Reconstruction Congressmen sought to fund race-conscious school integration efforts, which they understood as not only permissible but necessary to achieve the 14th Amendment's goals.¹⁷

Today's colorblind advocates regularly cite the late 19th Century Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which supported state-sanctioned *de jure* segregation. The dissenters in that case called for a colorblind society that did not sort people by their racial classifications into separate and unequal train cars, bus seats, and public schools.¹⁸ In fact, Justice Harlan's famous *Plessy* dissent stated that the 14th Amendment eliminated the evils of "caste" so that our society would become blind to "color" as a means to demarcate a "superior, dominant" ruling class.¹⁹

Although Harlan's dissent has been interpreted by conservative lawyers to say public policy must never take race into account, he, in fact, argued that *Plessy* was unconstitutional because it perpetuated a caste system that offended 14th Amendment principles. He also argued that we need to pay attention to race to eliminate racially discriminatory laws.²⁰ Harlan's race-conscious conception was embodied in public policies that came much later, in the 1960s and early 1970s, when Federal courts ordered race-conscious remedies such as school desegregation and affirmative action to dismantle *de jure* segregation.

Paradoxically, these 20th Century race-conscious policies would become the target of a systematic political backlash, led by conservatives who claim, in Justice Harlan's name, that any acknowledgement of race—even to remedy race-conscious segregation—is constitutionally wrong. Perhaps the most striking feature of this contemporary colorblind argument is its premise, that our society has corrected all historical racial discrimination. In writing a critique of this "colorblind" assumption, Lopez points out that the colorblind argument is grounded in an understanding that "*race is divorced from social meaning,*"²¹ despite much evidence to the contrary.

In recent "colorblind" court cases, White plaintiffs have sought to end race-conscious affirmative action policies in high education and student assignment policies in K-12 public schools. Universities, school districts and civil rights lawyers have responded to these claims by documenting the legacy of discriminatory race-conscious decisions, which affect where people live and who has access to what schools. If race-conscious policies created the segregation and related inequality, Justice Harlan's argument goes, then race-conscious policies are needed to dismantle them.

Similarly, respondents have argued that not only are race-conscious policies necessary to dismantle discriminatory systems, but also that such policies can assist universities and public schools in deriving the educational benefits of racial and ethnic diversity for all students.

Neither argument for race-conscious policies—the legacy of age-old discrimination or the more recent argument for the educational benefits of diversity—has carried much weight with today's conservative colorblind judges. Still, of the two, the latter argument has been more successful, especially in the higher education cases, as I explain below. Interestingly

enough, it is this second, “educational benefits of diversity” argument that most clearly illustrates why the current educational reform efforts are problematic in an increasingly racially diverse society.

The latest Supreme Court ruling on this issue in K-12 education, the 2007 *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle (PICS)* decision, was based on two student assignment cases from Louisville, KY, and Seattle, WA. Chief Justice Roberts wrote the “colorblind” majority opinion in *PICS*, arguing that allowing racial balancing would effectively assure “that race will always be relevant in American life.” The implication here is that ignoring race makes it irrelevant. Asserting the colorblind argument, Roberts stated: “*The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.*”²²

It was Justice Kennedy’s swing opinion in *PICS*, therefore, that kept race-consciousness permissible in K-12 student assignment plans. He wrote that to the extent that Roberts’ plurality opinion suggests “the Constitution mandates that state and local school authorities must accept the status quo of racial isolation in schools, it is, in my view, profoundly mistaken.”²³

Kennedy argued, in agreement with the four justices who did not concur with Roberts, that school districts do indeed have a “compelling state interest” in racially balancing school enrollments. In other words, school district policies intended to create diverse public schools are constitutional, according to a majority of the Supreme Court in *PICS*, as long as they are tailored narrowly in a manner that does not violate other constitutional principles. Kennedy noted that in the “real world,” “colorblindness” cannot be a universal constitutional principle; thus, “it is permissible to consider the racial makeup of schools and to adopt general policies to encourage a diverse student body, one aspect of which is its racial composition.”²⁴

As a result of the *PICS* decision, school officials are no longer allowed to use the racial/ethnic identity of *individual* students in making school assignments, although they can consider the racial/ethnic demographics of the students *overall* when deciding where to build new schools, draw school attendance zones, and conduct outreach to families to attract them to certain schools. Thus, the Supreme Court kept race-conscious policies alive, while at the same time making it much more difficult for school districts to balance school enrollments based on that consciousness.

The central focus in the Louisville and Seattle cases that led to the *PICS* ruling, therefore, was on the tailoring of these specific student assignment plans that had created the racially diverse schools as a remedy for prior discrimination and less on the districts’ efforts to derive the *educational benefits* of diverse schools. In fact, Roberts and his three concurring justices (Justices Scalia, Alito, and Thomas) who ruled against the districts noted that the court need not resolve the dispute over “. . . whether racial diversity in schools has a marked impact on test scores and other objective yardsticks or achieves intangible socialization benefits,” because the school districts’ policies designed to achieve that diversity were not constitutional: the point of their impact was moot. Still, these same

justices admonished Louisville and Seattle school officials for their failure to make a stronger case for the *educational benefits* of diversity. As Chief Justice Roberts noted, the Louisville and Seattle officials' rationales for their desegregation plans are framed only in terms of each district's history and racial demographics, "rather than to any pedagogic concept of the level of diversity needed to obtain the asserted *educational benefits*"²⁵ (emphasis added).

Meanwhile, Justice Kennedy and the other four justices who supported the schools districts' claims of a compelling state interest in creating diverse schools implied that there are indeed educational benefits to such diversity. Their conception of such benefits

In sharp contrast to the "colorblind" legal argument, research findings reveal the profound role of race in education.

appears to be tightly tied to narrow academic measures, especially standardized tests, however, although Justice Breyer did argue for a democratic element to diverse public schools that reflects the "pluralistic society" in which our children will live: "It is an interest in helping our children learn to work and play together with children of different racial backgrounds."²⁶

Unfortunately, prior to agreeing to hear these two *PICs* cases, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear *Comfort v. The Lynn School Committee*, in which the Lynn, MA, public school officials had put forth a much stronger argument for the *educational benefits* of race-conscious student assignment policies in K-12 education than either the Louisville, KY, or Seattle, WA, districts had in *PICs*.

In 2005, the First Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in the *Comfort* case that the Lynn school district has "a compelling interest in securing the educational benefits of racial diversity."²⁷ The Lynn school district was defending a K-12 student transfer plan designed to racially balance schools. The appellate court upheld the Lynn Plan as a narrowly tailored policy that did not simply pursue a critical mass of minority students for its own sake. It did so by applying the analytic framework set forth in U.S. Supreme Court affirmative action rulings, especially its 2003 *Grutter v. Bollinger* decision regarding the University of Michigan Law School admissions policies, to the context of a K-12 student transfer plan. The appellate court argued that Lynn balanced its school enrollments for the sake of *obtaining the educational benefits that flow from having a racially diverse student body* (emphasis added).²⁸

In doing this, the Appellate Court acknowledged that racial balancing for its own sake is unconstitutional for both universities and public schools. At the same time, the Court provided much more detail about the "educational benefits" a school district may hope to derive from racially balancing its students, including "promoting cross-racial understanding, breaking down stereotypes, fostering livelier and better informed class discussions, and preparing students to succeed in an increasingly diverse society." When districts seek such benefits, the Court argued, racial balancing is, in fact, permissible."²⁹

As the appellate court noted in the 2005 *Comfort* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court had, in its 2003 *Grutter* decision, largely deferred to the law school's educational judgment not only in determining that diversity would produce these benefits, but also in determining that these benefits were critical to the school's educational mission.³⁰ Although the Supreme Court's *PICs* decision supersedes the appellate court ruling in *Comfort*, the latter case and decision offer more helpful insight into the educational benefits of diversity in K-12 public schools that can help frame future legal arguments.

In the remainder of this brief, I present social science evidence that demonstrates why the rulings in both the *Grutter* and *Comfort* cases, most notably their focus on the educational benefits of diversity, are far more important to the future of our increasingly diverse country than a "colorblind" argument.

The Progressive Potential of a Race-Conscious Society: Addressing Racial/Ethnic Inequality and Embracing the New Racial Order

In sharp contrast to the "colorblind" legal argument, research findings reveal the profound role of race in education. From evidence on how people make choices about their children's schools to the research on cultural biases in standardized curriculum and assessments, there is no doubt that race matters in U.S. public education. The research, as illustrated below, is clear that when education and housing policies do not actively attempt to balance communities, schools, and students by race, they lead to more segregation and inequality because in the "real world" Justice Kennedy alludes to, people are anything but colorblind.

Even as a growing number of people—particularly young adults—embrace racial, ethnic and cultural diversity, far too many are stuck making daily choices in a context in which neighborhoods, schools and opportunities are demarcated by blatant color lines. Moreover, ending up on one side of these color lines or the other has material consequences, including what your property values are and the likelihood your child is admitted to a top university. What are needed are policies explicitly designed to break down these racial/ethnic barriers.

Indeed, the physical construction of Congressional districts as they relate to the race/ethnicity of the people who live within the boundaries suggest that policymakers are not colorblind at all when it comes to calculating their electability.³¹ But being race-conscious *and* progressive on issues of race in the U.S. today requires a two dimensional approach.

Dimension No. 1: Addressing Ongoing Racial/Ethnic Inequality

Policymakers must support programs that lessen inequality overall, particularly correlations between racial/ethnic groups and measures of well-being such as educational

attainment, access to jobs, income and wealth, and political voice and influence. Policies related to housing and school choice need to address the multiple barriers to creating and sustaining stable, diverse communities.

Dimension No. 2: Promoting Racially/Ethnically Diverse and Integrated Communities

Progressive race-conscious policymaking means tapping into changing conceptions of race and racial diversity that are starting to emerge, especially among younger Americans, to promote more racially/ethnically diverse communities, workplaces, and educational institutions. Building on the work of educators exploring the educational benefits of diversity within racially complex school and university classrooms is a good place to start.

As the research below illustrates, there is much to be done in both dimensions. Indeed, age-old patterns of segregation and stratification are still with us (Dimension No. 1), but at the same time there is growing evidence that racial/ethnic attitudes are changing rapidly, especially among younger generations of Americans who have grown up in a different demographic context than their parents or grandparents (Dimension No. 2). The problem is that these younger Americans are becoming adults and making choices about where to purchase or rent homes amid existing structures of racial inequality constructed decades ago.

Hence, I argue that policymakers must address race-conscious policies, practices and conditions that perpetuate segregation and inequality while, simultaneously, tapping into the changing racial attitudes of Americans. These two goals are complementary and mutually reinforcing, but only if policymakers play a leadership role in constructing a more dynamic and diverse society.

Dimension No. 1: Addressing Ongoing Racial/Ethnic Segregation and Inequality

Even if every American woke up tomorrow wearing a pair of colorblind glasses and literally could not see the skin color of people they interact with, there would *still* be age-old patterns of racial segregation and inequality in place affecting peoples' day-to-day lives. In fact, there is ample evidence that even as individual racial attitudes improve, the choices people make about where to live and send their children to school continue to be influenced by multiple factors still correlated with race.

We know, for example, that property values and the perceived quality of the public schools—even when controlling for housing quality and school outcome data—vary depending on the race/ethnicity of the people who lived there in the past, who is moving in, and who continues to live there.³² This is how race and ethnicity become part of the way in which the society is organized, making the individual choices of seemingly colorblind people far from race-neutral. These structures of inequality need to be better understood to help policymakers, educators, and parents appreciate how they affect all of us—even those of us with very progressive racial attitudes—in ways we do not always recognize.

Below is a brief overview of the research on what those structures of segregation and inequality look like in terms of families' access to communities and public schools.

Access to Communities and Their School Districts

At the end of World War II, most U.S. metro areas had large urban populations and swathes of underdeveloped suburban land where developers were poised to build single-family houses for middle- and working-class city dwellers.³³ At the same time, several federal, state and local housing policies enabled White families to buy suburban homes while assuring Blacks migrating from the south to northern and Midwestern metro areas lacked access to these same communities.³⁴ These policies included local zoning laws, racial segregation in public housing, and the purposeful exclusion of African-Americans from federal mortgage lending programs.³⁵

Public education was intertwined with these housing patterns. In fact, a major component of the “pull” of the suburbs for Whites of European descent has been the rise of suburban public education systems with more resources, better outcomes and fewer poor students than the urban schools left behind.³⁶ Thus, for many who migrated to the suburbs, the process of buying a home in suburbia was also about “buying” school districts with their own tax bases and local control.³⁷

By the 1970s, these synchronized migrations of Whites from urban to suburban and Blacks from rural to urban had created a pervasive system of racial segregation that has yet to be undone. By the time the most blatant discriminatory policies were revoked through Civil Rights legislation and court cases, the race-conscious housing patterns were in place. Indeed, many of the homes, public schools, and boundary lines constructed during suburban expansion still exist, creating a housing market that continues to divide people easily by income and more surreptitiously by race.³⁸ Over time, these patterns have shaped the identities of neighborhoods and school districts, the networks of real estate agents, and the conceptions home buyers have of where they belong.³⁹

In recent decades, however, the patterns have been changing as the White, non-Hispanic population has declined to less than 64% of the total, while Hispanic and Asian populations have increased.⁴⁰ Today, more Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians are moving into the suburbs, while a growing number of Whites are moving to “exurban” suburbs or gentrifying city neighborhoods. In the current era, therefore, the very meaning of “urban” versus “suburban”—once highly coded terms related to race and class—is changing rapidly.⁴¹

As this urban-suburban “trading racial places” occurs in a “post-racial” and “colorblind” society, we should witness over time an increase in racially diverse communities in both contexts. Instead, we see a high degree of racial resegregation.⁴² For instance, one study found that 56% of suburban neighborhoods that were integrated in 1980 had become predominantly non-White by 2010.⁴³ Another study concluded that increases in minority and low-income enrollment in suburban schools leads to increases in the segregation levels of each group.⁴⁴

Furthermore, ongoing discriminatory practices, both public and private, affect metro migration patterns within and across changing urban and suburban landscapes. For instance, real estate agents still steer people to different neighborhoods based on their race.⁴⁵ Mortgage lending and insurance industries offer different terms and policies to minority homebuyers than to majority ones and deny non-Whites' applications at disproportionately high rates.⁴⁶ In an analysis of housing values across school district boundaries in one suburban county, a strong negative relationship was found between school district racial/ethnic composition and home values, even after controlling for the quality of the house and a wide array of factors, including neighborhood racial/ethnic composition and household income. In fact, two similar homes differed almost \$50,000 in price when one was located in a school district with a 30% Black/Hispanic student populations and the other in a 70% Black/Hispanic district.⁴⁷

In this way, racial/ethnic segregation is related to the “devaluing” of homes in districts enrolling high percentages of Black and Hispanic children. This devaluation leads to lower property tax revenue, even when the *rate* of taxation is high. This in turn leads to the self-fulfilling prophecy of racial segregation when “bad” schools, “bad” neighborhoods, and “bad” students are intertwined.⁴⁸ To make matters worse, with the concentration of poor students of color in high-poverty school districts, their education is more susceptible to political corruption and fiscal malfeasance in an ongoing pattern of disempowered Black, Latino and poor communities.⁴⁹

Even more problematic, much of this racial segregation and inequality occurs *between* school districts and not *within* them, making possible solutions to these problems more complicated and dependent upon inter-district solutions.⁵⁰ We need housing and school choice policies that explicitly tackle barriers to creating sustainable, racially diverse communities and schools. Small, piecemeal efforts in housing policy have been made in the last few decades to address these issues, including the federal “Moving to Opportunity” program or court-ordered housing integration plans in places such as Westchester County, NY.⁵¹ These efforts can and should be improved and expanded. So, too, should our school choice policies—which could work in sync with pro-integration housing policies if they were not colorblind.

Access to Schools via Choice Policies and Patterns

School choice policy has a long history in the U.S., including a period in the 1970s and '80s when hundreds of school districts across the country implemented “voluntary” desegregation plans that allowed parents to choose among racially balanced schools. These older school choice policies were designed to not only provide families with choices but also to achieve the larger, societal goal of racial integration.⁵² But by the 1990s, new forms of school choice policy were driven by different “colorblind” market-driven goals of increasing competition and reducing regulation—including racial balancing guidelines—in public education.⁵³

These next-generation school choice policies, such as intra- and inter-district open-enrollment plans, charter schools, and voucher plans, were not intended to bring about more racial integration. Rather, they were part of a larger set of market-based reforms in education that stressed increased testing and a “colorblind” neo-*Plessyism*: namely, achieving a system of “separate but equal” education in which student outcomes matter more than student access to the same schools.⁵⁴

Two comprehensive reviews of the research evidence on such market-based, *laissez-faire*, and ostensibly colorblind school choice policies conclude that they consistently lead to more racial segregation and inequality.⁵⁵ Thus, it is perhaps no accident that, over the last 20 years, the expansion of colorblind school choice policies has correlated with increased racial segregation in public education. Certainly, other developments have contributed to rising levels of segregation, especially the end of court-ordered school desegregation plans, the changing demographics of the K-12 population, and ongoing housing segregation. But the research evidence leaves little doubt that the proliferation of nominally “colorblind,” market-oriented school choice policies has contributed to growing racial isolation at the macro level.

This research strongly suggests that when a school choice policy is *laissez-faire* in addressing race and inequality—a theoretically colorblind policy—the decisions that parents make in choosing schools for their children are anything but colorblind, resulting in greater racial segregation.⁵⁶ Absent public policies that foster viable, racially diverse schools, parents left to their own devices without access to integrated schools will make color-conscious choices that create greater racial imbalances, which in turn affect perceptions of the quality of schools.⁵⁷ White parents, in particular, are more likely to make choices of segregated, predominantly White schools and programs when they are not provided with reasons, options or incentives to do otherwise.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, parents of color in market-based choice plans also end up choosing more racially isolated schools—such as urban charter schools—in part because they have few other choices.⁵⁹

This pattern of segregation is particularly clear in the evidence on charter school reform, the fastest growing school choice policy. According to Mickelson *et al.*,⁶⁰ charter schools are more racially isolated than regular public schools. In another research review, Ni concludes that charter schools are either not racially distinct from or less racially diverse than their surrounding districts and almost always less integrated than nearby public schools. Ni notes that the consistency of this finding across contexts is surprising given the large inter-state variation in charter school policies and patterns of racial segregation.⁶¹ Studies of charter schools in individual states show similar results.⁶² It is difficult to refute the central theme emerging from this research: enrollment patterns of charter schools are far from colorblind.

Similarly, the evidence that exists on open-enrollment plans, which allow families to apply for student transfers from one school or district to another, also suggests they lead to greater school-level racial and ethnic segregation. For instance, the more limited research on open-enrollment indicates that due to the lack of support for disadvantaged families—namely outreach to low-income communities or free transportation—these plans

disproportionately enabled White and more affluent students to transfer to more advantaged school systems, thereby exacerbating inequality between school districts.⁶³ In a research review of inter-district open-enrollment plans Holme and Wells found that virtually all studies show low-income students and students of color are the *least* likely to participate.⁶⁴

And finally, research on tuition voucher plans in the U.S. shows us that once again school choice is anything but colorblind: that disproportionately White low-income families will use vouchers to flee racially diverse public schools, and that many predominantly White private and more affluent private schools will elect to not admit lower-income students of color with vouchers.⁶⁵ This pattern is reminiscent of the 1960s and '70s, when White families in the South were provided vouchers to send their children to private White schools once the public schools were finally forced to dismantle state-sanctioned racial segregation.⁶⁶

In short, the evidence on these newer forms of free-market school choice policies makes clear that despite the yearning of some members of the U.S. Supreme Court for a society in which race is irrelevant, when it comes to the choices that parents make about schools, the issue of race is front and center. Even if parents don't explicitly pay attention to race in choosing schools, the patterns of segregation in housing and parent networks coupled with school choice policies that lack outreach and transportation will exacerbate segregation instead of aiding parents in choosing more diverse schools.

Still, we know from our fairly recent history that school choice policies can be designed to have different results that lead to more and not less racial diversity. This requires a strong pro-active, race-conscious focus to reverse the tide, however. It will also require a closer examination of the relationship between "colorblind" school choice policy and an accountability system that ranks schools, students—and now teachers, too—according to test scores that strongly correlate to race and class.

Race, Culture, and Accountability Measures in Education: The Tail Wagging the Colorblind Dog

The third aspect of a progressive, race-conscious approach to addressing ongoing racial/ethnic segregation and inequality in education begins with an examination of the standardized-test-driven accountability system and the extent to which it is truly "colorblind." In this section, I illustrate how the current approach to accountability not only leads to more negative perceptions of racially diverse schools, but also limits educators' ability to tap into the educational benefits of the cultural diversity within those schools to help all students thrive intellectually. The more narrow the measures used to judge schools, teachers, and students, the less likely the educational system as a whole can envision racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity as an asset in preparing all children for the 21st Century.

Over the last three decades, public schools in the U.S. have been required to measure student learning with greater frequency via state-mandated standardized tests. Beginning

with competency, or basic skills, tests in the late 1970s, the idea that the “value” of public education can be depicted in a few test scores has become commonly accepted. Since 1994, the federal government has played a central role in the accountability movement, basically forcing each state to establish an accountability system or lose federal funding. Since that time, the accountability reform movement has grown increasingly uniform, becoming a national accountability system in the form of the national Common Core State Standards and assessments, now adopted by 45 states.⁶⁷

Initially, standardized tests in K-12 education were used mainly to identify students who were failing or those who were advanced enough to earn college credit in high school. Since No Child Left Behind, tests have been used to measure all students from grade 3 through high school.⁶⁸ Increasingly, the tests are also being used to evaluate teachers and their schools: The No Child Left Behind Act required states to publish on-line school report cards based largely on test scores.⁶⁹

Test scores, more than any other form of information about public education, are now made widely available to the general public and used to assess the “quality” of each school. The problem is not that schools must administer some standardized form of assessment to ascertain whether students are learning to read or grasping mathematical concepts; rather, it is the enormous amount of weight we place on these narrow measures, making their outcomes—and only them—synonymous with what it mean to be “educated.”

If all we value about education can be illustrated in a few numbers, then these recent policy developments are acceptable—good even. But if we want more than that, then this trajectory is problematic. Not only does it narrow children’s experiences and even the value of their schooling down to a handful of fill-in-the-bubble exams, it also perpetuates

An approach to accountability that relies almost exclusively on standardized tests often has a negative impact on the educational experiences of all children, but particularly those of low-income Black and Latino students.

and even legitimizes a far-from colorblind process of racial segregation. The strong negative correlation between the percentage of Black and Hispanic children in a school and its average test scores has been persistent.⁷⁰ There are many cultural and social explanations for this correlation that are not an indictment of Black and Hispanic students’ intelligence, although those are too rarely discussed.⁷¹ Meanwhile, if test scores are the only measure of school quality that receive any attention, then only those schools that are predominantly White, or Asian, or both are considered “good.”⁷²

When such values are placed on schools in a manner that strongly correlates to the race and class of the students, then efforts to create more racially/ethnically diverse schools are framed as though White and Asian families are “giving up something” because their schools will not be seen as “excellent.” This dampens any enthusiasm White and Asian

parents may have for school-level racial “diversity” as a means to prepare children for a global society.⁷³

This system also forces educators in “low-achieving” schools serving mostly low-income Black and Hispanic students to fixate on raising test scores via a curriculum focused almost exclusively on the material tested, leaving little room to build upon the knowledge and understandings that students bring to school. Meanwhile, research on learning and pedagogy suggest that the best way to engage students is to build on their existing knowledge and then connect those understandings to more abstract and unfamiliar topics.⁷⁴

Thus, an approach to accountability that relies almost exclusively on standardized tests often has a negative impact on the educational experiences of all children, but particularly those of low-income Black and Latino students. Such a system also works directly against political incentives to create more racially and ethnically diverse schools. When the entire educational system is not only separate and unequal along racial/ethnic lines, but also measured, evaluated and then “valued” almost exclusively according to test scores, the correlation between race and schools deemed to be “bad” based only on these narrow measures is high, exacerbating the race-based inequalities that already exist. Such a system is anything but colorblind, and can only be addressed via a race-conscious and progressive agenda.

Part of that agenda could *potentially* include several elements found in the newly implemented Common Core Standards reform. In fact, many progressive educators celebrate the fact that the Common Core, if taught in a manner that does not put standardized tests at the center, provides students with the opportunity to engage in close critical readings of complex texts and to question and interrogate what they read. In theory, the Common Core provides teachers with more freedom for planning meaningful literacy experiences for students. Furthermore, the Common Core guidelines recommend some texts that reflect a departure from the traditional canon that has marginalized students from non-White and low-income backgrounds for many years.⁷⁵

While the mandated tests and teacher evaluation systems designed to measure students’ Common Core learning have pushed this reform in the wrong direction, the Common Core actually has far more potential—“progressive potential” even—than is currently being realized.⁷⁶

As a result of this potential, a small but growing band of educators at the grassroots level are attempting to use the Common Core framework, with its emphasis on “complexity, range and quality” to engage students in anti-bias texts and in deeper, richer dialogues in which their assumptions are challenged. Such pedagogy is best used in culturally and racially diverse schools and classrooms. Historic Civil Rights organizations, such as the Southern Poverty Law Center, are embracing this “progressive potential” of the Common Core. Such efforts can and should be shared and expanded. According to teachers working with the Center on these issues, “We see the Common Core as a powerful opportunity to build diversity into instruction and encourage powerful dialogue.”⁷⁷

In racially and ethnically diverse schools, such experiences could easily tap into, strengthen and augment the *educational benefits of diversity* in a manner similar to what the University of Michigan Law School and the Lynn, MA, district officials were arguing for in the court cases noted above. Such “educational benefits” include, but are not limited to, the factors outlined in the First Circuit Court of Appeals ruling, including fostering livelier and better informed class discussions that challenge all students to examine their own assumptions and preparing students to succeed in an increasingly diverse society by garnering greater cross-racial understanding and breaking down stereotypes.

Unfortunately, the mandated tests and teacher evaluation systems that have come to dominate how we measure students’ Common Core learning have pushed this reform in the wrong direction, toward a narrow curriculum that undermines its far more progressive potential. When good ideas that could help support racially and ethnically diverse schools and prepare all students for a more dynamic and diverse global economy are being thwarted by a testing regime, it is time to reevaluate the importance we have placed on narrow measures of “student achievement.” Building on a groundswell of resistance to such approaches across the country,⁷⁸ a more race-conscious and progressive policy agenda can unfold.

As I noted above, however, fostering a race-conscious *and* progressive policy agenda in the U.S. today requires a two-dimensional approach. The first is to address the ongoing racial/ethnic inequality discussed in this section. The second, discussed briefly below, is to promote a more racially/ethnically integrated and intercultural society.

Dimension No. 2: Promoting Racially/Ethnically Diverse and Integrated Communities

Since the U.S. Civil Rights movement, racial attitudes of Americans have changed in a complicated manner that is both more accepting of racial differences and less understanding of the causes of ongoing racial inequality. Thus, a growing number of Americans simultaneously embrace the concept of “diversity” while proclaiming to be “colorblind.”

Thus, on the one hand, public opinion poll and interview data show that, at least superficially, Whites in general, and younger Whites in particular, are less likely to be prejudiced against or hold stereotypes of members of different racial and ethnic groups.⁷⁹ Whites are also more accepting of racially diverse neighbors and classmates for their children than those in previous generations.⁸⁰ This is certainly true of adults of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who attended racially diverse schools and had more inter-racial contact.⁸¹ Diversity is good and even beneficial when we think about popular culture, including the color of the faces we see on TV and in advertisements, the music we value, our dance techniques, the clothes we wear, etc.⁸²

Yet, on the other hand, after years of political attacks on race-conscious policies, many diversity-supporting Whites put forth “colorblind” political arguments, implying that despite ongoing ingrained structures of racial inequality and segregation, race no longer

matters in the U.S. Thus, it cannot and should not be addressed by public policies.⁸³ Any lingering racial inequality, the argument goes, is not the result of discrimination but rather the “fault” of people of color who should work harder.⁸⁴

This colorblind-diversity contradiction at a societal and individual level, reflected in opinion poll and interview data, suggests that many Americans want to embrace the *social dimensions* of our racial/ethnic diversity as “hip” and “global.” But, paradoxically, when it comes to the *political and economic dimensions of our society*—those that could best be addressed by race-conscious public policies—White Americans in particular prefer to be more colorblind. Researchers have given these contradictions different labels, including “lassiez-faire racism,”⁸⁵ “double consciousness,”⁸⁶ and “fractured habitus,” a sociological term that explains the state of “social agents” who hold contradictory attitudes or dispositions.⁸⁷

Sometimes people who hold these views consider themselves “liberal” on “social” issues such as gay marriage or abortion, but “conservative” when it comes to programs and policies designed to redistribute resources and opportunities.⁸⁸ Using such a framework, race-conscious policies such as affirmative action are not considered fair, but racially and ethnically “diverse” college campuses are good. The inherent contradictions between these two positions, given the racial inequality in the K-12 educational system, too often goes unexamined, as does any detailed examination of ongoing racial inequalities in housing and income.

It may well be in the field of education where we can see this contradiction most clearly. A growing number of parents realize that their children need to be prepared for a diverse global society. At the same time, they are making choices about schools within a competitive and hierarchical educational system, and they fear race-conscious policies may hurt their children’s chances of winning.⁸⁹

This policy context creates three strikes against parents who desire racially diverse schools. First, neighborhood and school district boundaries are divided by race. Second, the policy drift away from desegregation and toward market-based school choice policies has led to more racially segregated schools. And finally, the narrow, test-driven accountability system has fostered negative perceptions of racially diverse schools in comparison with privileged and homogeneous schools. In light of this contradiction between what parents say about racially diverse schools and the so-called “colorblind” policies that foster more segregation, strong leadership is needed to move this increasingly diverse society toward a more progressive future.

Discussion and Recommendations

Given the evidence presented in this brief and the racial/ethnic and cultural destiny of this county, progressive policymakers should tap into changing conceptions of racial diversity starting to emerge, especially among younger Americans, to promote more diverse communities, workplaces, and educational institutions designed to lessen separate and unequal opportunities.

Policymakers should reconsider the validity of competitive market-based school choice policies that lead to greater segregation. We know from our history of voluntary school desegregation that more inclusive, cooperative, and less competitive school choice policies can create racially/ethnically and culturally diverse schools.⁹⁰

Similarly, other than those who manufacture standardized tests or seek to take over schools that perform poorly on these accountability measures, it is difficult to figure out how an emphasis on such narrow measures of teaching and learning benefit an increasingly diverse society. We need broader measures of school quality designed to capture dimensions of schooling that many parents and the authors of the Common Core State Standards claim to embrace, including social and emotional development, critical citizenship, and the development of creativity, ingenuity, and communication skills.

In other words, we need a two-pronged education policy agenda to implement the two dimensions of a progressive approach to racial inequality. The first part of this agenda is to *create more racially diverse schools through housing and education policies that shape student access to one school versus another*. The second part of this agenda is to shine a light on *what goes on within those schools*, especially as it relates to what and how students are learning and how their classroom experiences relate to the educational benefits of diversity.

1. Creating and Sustaining More Racially and Ethnically Diverse Schools

The first component is overcoming the physical, geographic and political barriers that perpetuate segregation in public schools. The following three options would appear most logical:

- **Support and Sustain Diverse Districts and Communities.** National, state and local policymakers must take a hard look at the demographic future of this country and recognize the value of supporting racially and ethnically diverse schools, districts and communities. Furthermore, as more of these districts are created with the migration of Blacks, Latinos and Asians from urban to suburban communities, state policymakers should see the wisdom in maintaining stability in suburban school districts. If no such actions are taken, many of these districts will become the self-fulfilling prophecy of poor districts serving students of color with a low-level curriculum, low expectations and few tangible or intangible resources. Strict guidelines and incentives for local zoning boards, developers, and real estate agents to promote and sustain communities with a mix of incomes, ethnicities, and cultures can be provided in conjunction with fair housing policies and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) program to “Build Integrated and Sustainable Communities.”⁹¹
- **Fostering Cross-District Cooperation/Collaboration.** We know from our history of voluntary or “choice-based” school desegregation—both intra- and inter-district—that it is not difficult to structure schools choice policies that create and sustain more racially/ethnically, socio-economically, and culturally diverse schools.

One way is to expand upon existing inter-district special education or vocational education collaborations. More state and county governments could promote meaningful magnet-like programs to attract students with shared interests from across district boundaries. States could provide incentives for fragmented, small school districts to cooperate in developing county-wide magnet schools. Many of these small districts are struggling financially to support separate and unequal public school systems heavily reliant on local property taxes. Cross-district schools of choice can help districts pool resources and offer many students richer educational options. Examples of such county-wide schools are found in New York and New Jersey, and interest in such schools is growing.⁹² Providing outreach and transportation to students across separate and unequal school districts would be important. Assuring each segregated district is able to send a specified percentage of students to these schools would guarantee racially and socio-economically diverse cross-district magnet schools.

- **Encouraging Inter-district Transfers to Promote Diversity.** School choice policies can also support more diversity by replicating the eight existing (or recently ended) inter-district school desegregation programs.⁹³ More states should amend existing open-enrollment laws to promote diversity instead of segregation. In these inter-district model programs, mostly lower-income students of color transfer into affluent, predominantly White districts, although in a few of these programs, White students have been drawn to urban magnet schools as well. Such inter-district choice plans would complement cross-district or regional magnet schools described above. Simple guidelines could help lessen the segregative impact of current open-enrollment plans. For instance, open-enrollment laws could be restructured to be in line with NCLB's requirement that students in failing schools and districts should be offered the choice to transfer to non-failing schools and districts. Currently, too many districts reject students trying to make these inter-district transfers even though they would often lead to more racial integration. Support for transferring students in the form of outreach, recruitment, a formal application process and free transportation across district lines would be critical.

2. Supporting Curriculum, Teaching, and Assessment that Taps into the Educational Benefits of Diversity

The second prong of the policy agenda builds on the first through the demonstration of *how* student diversity enhances all students' educational experiences. Growing support for diverse learning environments is grounded in common sense, empirical evidence, and legal arguments suggesting such settings provide the opportunity for all students to not only challenge their own assumptions of right and wrong, but also think more deeply about social and political issues within a culturally complex society.

- **Expand Legal and Political Challenges Based on the Educational Benefits of Diversity.** Recent court cases have illuminated evidence of the educational benefits for students of learning in racially, ethnically and culturally diverse

contexts. As noted, federal courts have ruled that there is a compelling state interest in maintaining diversity in both higher education and K-12 contexts because of the educational benefits that can accrue. Federal court rulings in both the *Grutter* and *Comfort* cases offer a solid foundation for the legal argument that racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse K-12 public schools foster greater “cross-racial understanding . . . [and] livelier and better informed class discussions [while] preparing all students to succeed in an increasingly diverse society.”⁹⁴

Using the courts to address these issues is one potential line of action, but is unlikely to be sufficient in the near term, in part because of the precedence set by decisions reinforcing the “colorblind” premise. The evidence of the harm caused by “colorblind” policies, and the benefits of alternative policies such as those recommended in this brief, have the potential to energize a grassroots movement, which is more likely to be effective in bringing change by addressing state and federal lawmakers rather than relying solely on the courts.

- **Tapping into the Common Core’s Potential to Support the Educational Benefits of Diversity.** Unfortunately, policymakers’ support today for school choice and testing policies appears disconnected from both the evidence and legal arguments for the educational benefits of diversity and the ways in which those policies are thwarting diversity. There is, however, some progressive potential amid a rather regressive context of strict and consequential teacher evaluation systems. For instance, as noted above, the newly implemented Common Core Standards reform offers one area of possible improvement, with some educators using them to build diversity into instruction.

Despite this progressive potential, unfortunate policy choices have tied the Common Core to a punitive accountability system that places students’ educational futures and teachers’ jobs on the line based on standardized test scores. These exams fail to capture educators’ efforts to help students engage in more critical thinking and consider several different perspectives and “correct” answers to difficult questions. This understanding, therefore, leads to additional policy recommendations.

- **Placing Far Less Emphasis on Standardized Tests.** The current heavy emphasis on standardized tests is detrimental to good teaching that engages students in creative ways. For students who live and will work in a racially diverse and culturally complex society, this strong emphasis on discrete bits of standardized knowledge and information is even more problematic. The current colorblind policy focus on standardized testing as the almost exclusive measure of high-achieving students and good schools and teachers does an educational disservice to students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Such understandings work against racially diverse schools in ways that are unfair and erroneous and often lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy via a downward spiral of diverse schools as students with more resources and higher test scores leave. Nearly

20 years ago, Elmore and Fuhrman predicted this downward spiral of more diverse schools measured by narrow, non-diverse measures. As state testing regimes were first being implemented, they noted that because prior student academic achievement and students' social class are still the strongest predictors of how well a given school will do on academic achievement measures, "focusing state policy on student performance might simply concentrate high-achieving students in a few schools, thereby aggravating current disparities in the racial and socioeconomic composition of schools."⁹⁵

Research my colleagues and I conducted on racially diverse high schools from the 1970s revealed that many of these schools had "good" reputations. We learned from our historical case studies of these schools, however, that school reputations are incredibly fragile and need to be bolstered—and not undercut—by federal and state policies intended to hold schools accountable. Indeed, given everything that racially diverse schools have working against them in a racially segregated and unequal society, such policies should support these schools and not contribute to their demise.⁹⁶ It is time for 21st Century policymakers to consider broader, real-world accountability measures that more accurately reflect the range of experiences of students within racially and culturally diverse society and better prepare the next generation for life and work in culturally complex and global society.

Much can be done in the policy arena to support and further the educational benefits of diversity. Such efforts will only progress, however, in a context in which people in power admit that they and their constituents can indeed *see color*. In fact, we know that seeing *is* believing in the potential of the most racially and ethnically diverse democracy in the world.

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