

volunteer

Today's Desegregation: Not Your Father's Busing

School integration programs have been in place for decades, but the topic has gained renewed attention as part of the 2020 presidential election campaigns.

Like St. Louis' Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corp., school integration programs — often known by the shorthand terms “busing” or “deseg” — have evolved over the years. Some programs have moved from mandatory court-ordered systems to voluntary initiatives. Some have ended due to population shifts that led to more integrated communities. Some are changing their selection criteria.

Current Progress and Trends

“The school integration movement seems to be alive and well,” said Philip Tegeler, of the Poverty and Race Research Action Council, in an introduction to a 2019 report by the National Coalition on School Diversity (NCSD). “The support we received from the Obama administration energized and empowered the movement in a way that cannot be undone. The same growing grassroots constituency that gave federal leaders the support they needed to act has had the baton handed back to them, and they will not be silenced.”

Contemporary integration programs use several different processes to achieve diversity and address current legal and social issues. Some lessons taken from recent research projects, noted by VICC's Chief Executive Officer David Glaser, include:

- To achieve racial and socioeconomic diversity, districts should consider combining both race and socioeconomic status in their selection criteria, as selection based solely upon race of individual students may have legal implications today. Some programs use the racial composition of neighborhoods vs. that of individual students to alleviate legal concerns.
- To increase urban district engagement, seek state funding to replace funding that transfers with students from urban to suburban districts.
- To foster two-way desegregation, create urban magnet schools that appeal to suburban parents.
- Interdistrict desegregation programs improve the academic and social outcomes of all participating students, but may not meaningfully impact regional segregation trends. All districts, both urban and suburban, benefit from regional desegregation efforts.
- Program participants experience the most beneficial academic outcomes when students are given equitable access to gifted programs, advanced coursework and other district resources.
- Districts considering phasing out their programs should reassure parents that the district remains committed to their children, no matter what the final decision.



Teachers ride the bus along with transfer students to Babler Elementary in October.

Challenges

With changing population distribution and fluctuating political tides, the movement is facing several challenges, according to the NCSD report, “The State of Integration 2018.” (https://school-diversity.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/State-of-Integration_2018.pdf)

“The State of Integration 2018” includes reports from districts in four geographic regions. NCSD's strategic plan commits to a regional outreach strategy to help highlight and support state and local integration efforts. St. Louis is in Region III.

“We fought this battle over integration in the 1970s and, while it was a painful chapter in this city's history, we are better for it,” said the Louisville Courier Journal Editorial Board in an August 2018 editorial. “More importantly, our children are better for it. But the forced busing of the 1970s is gone, replaced with a thoughtful system of integrating schools while at the same time giving parents the choice of programs that interest them and their children.”

The report is a collection of essays by the NCSD's staff and members chronicling some of the new progress and opportunities occurring at state and local levels.

As St. Louis' Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corp. has reported in this publication and elsewhere, the St. Louis program is one that is studying how to continue its program. VICC's program has been extended, enabling participating schools to take new students through 2023-24 with an emphasis upon the placement of siblings of all current students. All students enrolled through this extended time may continue attending their selected schools through high school graduation, up to at least 2036.

Conscious & Unconscious Bias

and its Impact on Education

By Dr. Charlotte V. Ijei, L.P.C.



Dr. Ijei is director of Pupil Personnel & Diversity at Parkway School District.

FOR FURTHER READING

The Insidiousness of Unconscious Bias in Schools

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/03/20/the-insidiousness-of-unconscious-bias-in-schools/>

By Seth Gershenson and Thomas S. Dee
Brookings Institution's Brown Center Chalkboard
March 20, 2017

Does Unconscious Bias Training Really Work?

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2018/10/29/does-unconscious-bias-training-really-work/#49850abb8a2a>
By Janice Gassam

FORBES, Oct 29, 2018

How were you socialized as a child? What messages did you receive about other people who did not look like you? Answers to these questions could affect the ways in which different groups of students are accepted by adult leaders in schools, as well as how certain students are disciplined and evaluated academically.

“Bias is a prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person or group compared with another, usually in a way that’s considered to be unfair. Biases may be held by an individual, group or institution and can have negative or positive consequences,” says Dr. Renee Navarro, vice chancellor of Diversity and Outreach at the University of California, San Francisco.

Parkway School District administrators participate in a year-long book study, *Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People* by Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald. This work has had a significant impact on administrators’ ability to speak with others about bias and how it could negatively affect African-American students’ achievements, referral to Special School District, and discipline disparities. Every year, new administrators participate in this same book study, which is facilitated by other Parkway administrators.

In the study, we look at different types of biases that could be negatively affecting African-American students, specifically conscious bias (also known as explicit bias) and unconscious bias (also known as implicit bias). Everyone has biases that exist toward any social group such as gender, age, religion, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc. The focus is on how to recognize bias you might hold concerning African-American students, especially because the majority of our teachers and administrators in Parkway are white.

Parkway still struggles with hiring teachers and administrators of color. It continues to be a Goal 2 initiative of the Parkway Board of Education. Not having people in power who look like them, African-American students can be easily misunderstood if white administrators and teachers do not understand their own socialization process. Many educators have grown up in areas that were not diverse. In early years, several were exposed to misinformation, missing history, biased history and stereotypes about groups different from themselves. People become socialized to believe inaccurate information and it gets reinforced by the media, houses of worship, government and other institutions that reinforce the biases, whether conscious or unconscious.

One of the most common institutions that we battle is education. In schools, African-American students learn to conform to the mores of the majority — white teachers, administrators and students. If they do not conform and whites are either aware or unaware of their biases, African-American students are referred for discipline issues, which causes them to be removed from the educational setting, held to lower expectations, not quickly recognized as being intellectually gifted, and are referred at a higher rate for special school district evaluation. The number of students referred for evaluation is disproportionately higher than their white counterparts.

Parkway has trained equity representatives who sit at the table to interrupt any bias views that might come up. For example, when asked to name some of the strengths of the African-American student, the answers might quickly go to athletics, good humor, the style of dress or the student’s smile. Though these are wonderful traits, strengths in areas of academics might rarely be mentioned. The equity representative would then redirect the conversation in a way to help the teacher dig deeper. Other school districts have trained equity representatives as well. In Parkway, the referral rate and diagnoses have both decreased, but there continues to be more work to do.

Because it is impossible for us to eliminate biases that have been hard-wired from the way we were socialized, it is necessary to continue efforts to recognize bias if we are ever to level the playing field for African-American students in Parkway. Intentional recognition of the biases we hold, acknowledging we have them, will keep teachers and administrators from allowing biases to drive negative thinking about African-American students. Banaji and Greenwald refer to these biases as mindbugs and suggest they may lurk in our subconscious, but we all have the power to “weaken” their influence by examining our actions.

One example of examining one’s actions is a middle school teacher in Parkway who shared his story that, prior to studying conscious and unconscious bias, he had never asked an African-American student, “Is this the best you can do?” When he finally did ask the question, the student eagerly said, “No, it isn’t, and I should have put more effort into the work.” The teacher wept and stated to the group, “In the 25 years that I have been a teacher, I had never thought to ask an African-American student this question, but I am unwavering in asking my white students all of the time. I gave the student a chance to do the work

Versatile Clayton fourth-grader starts business, considers career options

Fourth-grader Skylar Wilson may not have her career path mapped out yet, but she certainly has plenty of options to consider.

Skylar, a VICC student at Meramec Elementary School in Clayton, already has a hair care business, but her interests also extend to music (piano, voice and violin), soccer, math and scouting. But this “kidpreneur” does know she wants to go to college somewhere in New York.

“I don’t know where her entrepreneurial spirit is going to take her,” said her mother, Leslie Christian-Wilson, herself an entrepreneur, VICC program graduate and PTO co-president at Meramec Elementary. Christian-Wilson joined the Ladue School District in the first wave of transfer students in 1982, graduating from Ladue Horton Watkins High School in 1986. Skylar’s father, Alvin John (AJ) Wilson Jr., was a Brentwood High School VICC graduate in 1986. Her uncle, Joshua Patton, attended Clayton schools through the VICC program, graduating in 1994.

Skylar Wilson started kindergarten as a resident student in the Clayton School district. When the family moved to St. Louis city during her second grade year, she was able to stay in the Clayton District through the VICC program, effective August 2016.

She’s an amazing little girl,” said Meramec School counselor Anthony Henderson. “She’s a great kid. She is a good student and a good friend. She’s an empathetic, caring kid.” Skylar’s social life is full, with friends both at school and in her city neighborhood, where she walks neighbors’ dogs.

Skylar also counts among her friends two favorite teachers, Tracy McKenna and Megan Hutson, her former kindergarten teacher whom she visits nearly every day.



Henderson noted that Skylar has been active in Girls on the Run as well as in Black History performances in the past. Her interest in performing may have been spurred by the success of one of her uncles, Sterling K. Brown, who is an Emmy Award-winning star of the TV show “This is Us.”

This year, Skylar’s attention has turned to the fall launch of Skylarlicious Naturals for Kids — The Unicorn Bath and Body Collection, an addition to her line of natural hair care products for kids. She was one of several girls who presented at the Second Annual All Girls Resource Fair and Expo, held Sept. 7 at the Center of Clayton.

The Skylarlicious Naturals line includes scents, bath bombs, smiling style cream moisturizer, leave-in detangler, shampoo and conditioner. Leslie Christian-Wilson, a natural hair stylist herself, created Skylarlicious Naturals for Skylar as a result of countless mother-daughter battles over painful hairstyling sessions. “I wanted to create products that would make doing our children’s hair a bonding experience, not a war zone,” Christian-Wilson said. Now, hair time with Skylar’s long, thick and curly African-American and Native-American hair is fun time.

Skylar and her mom do pop-up events about once a month to benefit charitable causes, and Skylar sells her products in her mom’s hair salon and boutique, Diversity Gallery, located in the historic Ville Neighborhood just north of the Central West End.

Whether Skylar heads for New York for a career in math (her current favorite subject), music, theatre, cosmetology or something else, she is bound to use her entrepreneurial spirit to succeed.

For more about Skylar’s hair care products, visit www.skylarlicious.com, on Instagram @imskylarlicious, and on Facebook at Skylarlicious Naturals.

Skylar Wilson at photo shoot (top), Skylar staffs her display at the recent Second Annual All Girls Resource Fair and Expo at the Center of Clayton.



Conscious & Unconscious Bias from page 2

over again and he received a B instead of a D just because I decided to challenge my own racial bias.” We must think differently in order to require the best out of each one of our students.

Conscious and unconscious biases can change the trajectory of African-American students for years to come if white teachers do not learn to challenge their biases. Transitioning students from elementary school to middle school, deciding what level of math to recommend for them, will direct

their path all the way through high school and beyond. Students must be held to the highest expectations, and teachers must be trained to question whether or not they are operating out of their biases and what is in the best interest of all students.

Where do we go from here? We must understand that everyone has biases. Parkway continues to work toward helping administrators, teachers and department leaders understand and confront their biases each day. It is imperative that we seize the opportunity to continue the conversation because of the implications of not knowing what biases we hold that could negatively impact all students, but specifically, African-American students.



Message from the CEO

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When you walk into a room, what assumptions do you make about the people that you see in the room? Until recently, I was probably only marginally aware that I was making such assumptions, but over the past several years I have learned and read quite a bit about the topic of unconscious bias and how it affects all of us more than we realize. Hidden biases and stereotypes particularly related to race and sex are widespread in our society.

The particularly frightening thing about implicit or unconscious bias is that we are making judgments and decisions on such factors and often are not even aware that we are doing so. Unfortunately, people in general are more likely to choose or associate positive qualities with people who look or sound like themselves or belong to the same social or ethnic group as their own. As Charlotte Ijei discusses in more detail in her article, this could be particularly problematic when the preponderance of teachers, administrators and people with power and influence

are white. As a result, even when we say we are not prejudiced, these biases can still manifest themselves in our decisions in surprising ways. As a result, becoming more aware of and examining our biases and the way they affect our decisions is critically important if we truly want to give all our students similar opportunities to be successful.

I believe I have grown quite a bit in this area during the past several years just by becoming aware of these issues, but I also recognize that it is an area that requires continued growth and focus. The impact of such biases that each of us have can have a significant impact on the students that we serve. We must all continue to work on a daily basis to improve and do better in this area.

Clearly this is an area in which there are significant opportunities for all of us to make continuous improvement. With work and close examination, I am confident we all can and will do so.

Today's Desegregation from page 1

Threats to Integration

But there are threats to school integration programs. Current threats, outlined in "The State of Integration 2018," include:

•Rollback of Obama-era progress

Along with other bureaucrats across the Trump administration who have set out to erase President Barack Obama-era regulatory advances, Department of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has targeted significant progress on school integration. Her department has eliminated most of Obama's key steps to promote school integration. But Congress has pushed back on some of these deregulatory moves, successfully removing longstanding budget riders prohibiting the use of federal funds for transportation to achieve racial integration.

Philip Tegeler, of Poverty & Race Research Action Council, in his article "Rollback of Obama-era Progress," finds hope in awakening Congressional leadership and a possible "path forward providing some specific, actionable goals that integration supporters can focus their attention on in the days ahead."

•School district secessions from the programs

Secession is a process whereby majority white, higher-income communities formally detach themselves from larger school districts in order to form smaller, whiter and wealthier school districts. By seceding, wealthy, predominantly white communities are able to use their large tax bases to serve a smaller population, allowing more resources per student.

Fragmentation of school districts makes it more difficult to achieve integration, wrote Jennifer Pollan on behalf of Poverty & Race Research Action Council. Even if secessions are not driven by racism, the fragmenting of school districts has inflicted disproportionate harm on low-income students and students of color. Secession often leaves the abandoned communities behind to struggle with a diminished tax base and decreasing property values, thereby exacerbating resource disparities and socioeconomic segregation.

Secessions began as far back as the 1970s and have occurred in a few waves over the years in various states.

About 81 communities have tried to secede from larger districts since 2000, and 47 of those have been successful, Pollan said.

•Uncertain future for diversity plans in cities such as Louisville, Kentucky.

By 2011, a survey of parents in Louisville's integrated district found that 80 percent were satisfied with their child's school, although residents strongly opposed court-ordered integration when it was introduced in 1975. But a recent proposed takeover of the local school district threatened to dismantle longstanding integration efforts in Louisville, wrote Jennifer Pollan. After a legal battle, the district struck a compromise with the state, allowing the district to retain most of its powers but agreeing to review and modify its plan for the 2020-21 school year. Another audit by the state is scheduled to start in September 2020.

•Pacific Legal Foundation's ongoing litigation

The Pacific Legal Foundation has filed lawsuits challenging the constitutionality of elementary and secondary school integration in cities such as New York City, Seattle, Louisville and Hartford, Connecticut. PLF's efforts include an unsuccessful 2016 lawsuit against St. Louis' VICC. PLF lost the case as well as an appeal.

VICC Today

In spite of these threats, challenges and changes, programs like VICC continue to work toward integrated schools and superior education for all students.

At its height (1999), VICC bused over 14,000 African-American students from the city to the suburbs. Over time, as allowed by agreements, some districts ended their participation in the program. A series of agreements in 1999, 2007, 2012 and 2016 have kept the desegregation program in place. Today, the program enables about 4,000 students to attend suburban schools.

A newsletter published by the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation to spread the word about the positive things happening in the voluntary transfer program and to offer educators a glimpse at innovative programs helping students succeed at area schools.

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