



Executive Summary

On June 28, 2007, the United States Supreme Court issued a decision on two related cases examining the use of race by K–12 public school districts as a factor in assigning students to schools. At issue was the constitutionality of desegregation policies voluntarily adopted by school districts in Louisville and Seattle. The Court found both districts’ policies to be unconstitutional. However, the Justices were divided in their reasoning, and Justice Kennedy’s decisive concurrence listed several race-conscious student assignment policies that could survive constitutional scrutiny.

The National Academy of Education (NAEd) Board of Directors recognized the importance of the social science issues framed by the litigation, and accordingly, constituted a committee in January 2007 to review the *amicus curiae* (friend of the court) briefs filed with the Supreme Court in support of petitioners and respondents in the two cases. The committee was asked to provide a summary and analysis of the social science evidence cited in the briefs and to generate a report to inform policy makers and the public.

At least 27 of the 64 amicus briefs filed in the two cases were found by the committee to include substantial discussions of social science research. After critically reviewing these briefs, the committee identified five key questions that were addressed by the research. These questions are informed by the nature of inquiry by courts in equal protection cases and are also central questions for policy makers and scholars.

1. Is racial diversity in a school environment associated with improved academic achievement?
2. Is racial diversity in a school environment associated with improved intergroup relations?
3. Is racial diversity in a school environment associated with improved long-term effects?
4. Is there a “critical mass” (or some counterpart) of racial diversity associated with any benefits of racial diversity?
5. Are there race-neutral alternatives that can yield benefits that are comparable to benefits that we know to be associated with race-conscious policies?

The committee's findings are summarized briefly as follows:

Academic Achievement

Overall, the research evidence supports four primary conclusions regarding the effects of racial diversity on academic achievement. First, there is a relatively common finding that White students are not hurt by desegregation efforts or adjustments in racial composition of schools. Second, although the apparent magnitude of the influence is quite variable, there is a relatively common finding that African American student achievement is enhanced by less segregated schooling. Third, these positive effects for African American students tend to be larger in earlier grades than in later grades and larger in studies using experimental designs or longitudinal data sets than in cross-sectional studies or studies that lack control groups. Fourth, the earliest studies tend to focus on the effects of court-ordered desegregation, and therefore, to combine the impacts of racial composition per se with various policy actions undertaken to bring about desegregation. The results of these earlier estimates appear to be more variable than studies focused solely on variations in racial composition.

Near-Term Intergroup Relations

Although racially diverse schools and classrooms will not guarantee improved intergroup relations, current research generally supports the conclusion that such diverse environments are likely to be constructive in this regard. The research also identifies conditions that need to be present in order for diversity to have a positive effect, as well as the mechanisms through which these improvements might take place. In addition, research findings offer guidance regarding the steps that schools can take to structure contact so that it realizes the inherent potential for positive outcomes.

Long-Term Effects of School Desegregation

The weight of the research evidence supports the conclusion that there are long-term benefits of desegregation in elementary and secondary schools. Under some circumstances and over the long term, experience in desegregated schools increases the likelihood of greater tolerance and better intergroup relations among adults of different racial groups.

The Critical Mass Question

The research presented in the *amicus* briefs convincingly describes the harms caused by racial isolation, addressing problems like tokenism and stereotype threat that are much more likely to arise in racially isolated schools. For the most part, the briefs do not argue for a given percentage of racially diverse enrollment that would avoid these problems. Four studies are cited that offer some numerical guidelines, with a minimum percentage enrollment for avoiding these harms ranging from 15 to 30 percent. Nevertheless, the committee determined that the research does not support the conclusion that any particular percent enrollment is sufficient to avoid the harms associated with racial isolation or that there is a specified relationship between increased diversity and educational benefits as the percent moves from 15 to 30 percent and beyond. The research does support the conclusion that racial diversity, particularly when accompanied by an otherwise beneficial school environment, can avoid or mitigate the harms of racial isolation.

Race-Neutral Alternatives

The *amicus* briefs explore several race-neutral policy options with some potential to drive racial diversity or the potential benefits of that diversity. The most prominent among these alternatives is the use of socioeconomic factors in the enrollment process and the use of school choice policies that tend to decouple students' school assignment from housing segregation. The research cited in the briefs, however, suggests that – although assignments made on the basis of socioeconomic status are likely to marginally reduce racial isolation and may have other benefits – none of the proposed alternatives is as effective as race-conscious policies for achieving racial diversity. School choice generally, and magnet schools in particular, have some potential to reduce racial isolation. But, school choice has the potential to *increase* segregation as well. The key for realizing the potential of these policies to achieve racial diversity to any significant degree is the inclusion of enrollment constraints, such as race-conscious policies, as part of the school choice policy.

Conclusion

In summary, the research evidence supports the conclusion that the overall academic and social effects of increased racial diversity are likely to be positive. Racial diversity per se does not guarantee such positive outcomes, but it provides the necessary conditions under which other educational policies can facilitate improved academic achievement, improved intergroup relations, and positive long-term outcomes. Because race-neutral alternatives – such as school choice and assignments based on socioeconomic status – are quite limited in their ability to increase racial diversity, it is reasonable to conclude that race-conscious policies for assigning students to schools are the most effective means of achieving racial diversity and its attendant positive outcomes. In the wake of the Supreme Court's decision regarding the Seattle and Louisville policies, the research on racial diversity in schools will remain important to educators and policy makers as they work within the Court's legal framework to craft procedures that provide students with the most beneficial educational environments.

