
Eric J. Cooper and Myron Orfield: Suburban schools the next integration battleground

We've all read for years that significant gaps in academic achievement between black and Latino students and their white and Asian peers are largely a byproduct of under-resourced and under-achieving urban schools.

But here's the rest of the story: Wealthier suburban districts are becoming more diverse -- and some suburban schools are employing bold leadership and effective teacher support to narrow the achievement gap.

Demographer [William Frey](#)'s analysis of 2010 Census data found that the share of blacks and Latinos originally from large metropolitan areas who are now living in suburbs is 51 percent and 59 percent, respectively.

Suburbs are considered to be the Shangri-La of public education, where «good» teachers stay, bond issues pass, and parent involvement brings classroom accountability. Most important, it's the place where achievement gaps should close.

And they have, in places like Eden Prairie, Minn. In this suburb, school officials found ways to meet the needs of African-American, Somali and Latino students whose enrollments surged over the last decade.

Initially, practices that worked for the district's historically white, well-to-do students fell short for the growing enrollment of low-income students of color. Then Superintendent [Melissa Krull](#) stepped in. Partners at the [Pacific Educational Group](#) and the [National Urban Alliance for Effective Education](#) helped Eden Prairie affirm high expectations for the newcomers, and provide professional development

that showed the teachers how to reach these students through culturally relevant instruction and strategies that employed neuroscience research. Educators changed how students were grouped for learning, placing more students of color in talented and gifted programs and Advanced Placement courses.

Results were unprecedented: From 2008 to 2011, state reading scores flatlined. In Eden Prairie, they improved 21 percentage points for black students, 12 percentage points for Latino students, 14 percentage points for special education students, and 28 percentage points for limited English speakers. Some gaps were reduced by nearly 50 percent compared with scores of white students, which also rose by 5 percentage points. If trends continue at this rate, district evaluators have suggested achievement gaps in Eden Prairie will be eliminated by 2014 without lowering common core standards for any group of students.

Yet research also shows that school achievement tends to plateau and then slide when low-income/ and students of color are isolated in segregated schools and academically tracked classrooms. Eden Prairie saw this coming. Krull drew new boundaries that limited the ratio of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches to about 25 percent in each elementary school. The plan affected 1,050 of Eden Prairie's nearly 10,000 students.

An uproar ensued after the school board approved the proposal, 4-3, last year. Dozens of families transferred their children to neighboring districts. The same board forced Krull out a few months ago, jeopardizing a plan that has boosted achievement.

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Some say that's what happens in those rare cases when idealism meets reality. But there's more to that story, too. Eden Prairie is no anomaly. The [University of Minnesota's Institute on Race and Poverty](#) is about to report that roughly one-third of the population in America's 50 largest metropolitan areas lives in racially diverse suburban areas -- areas where the population is between 20 and 60 percent non-white, like Eden Prairie. Many suburban districts will have to make increasingly difficult decisions when it comes to education. Those decisions will address resources, teacher quality, instructional strategies and how to ensure students are not segregated by race, culture or family income.

Many Eden Prairie parents opposed to the boundary changes wanted their children to attend neighborhood schools. This is a common and reasonable argument, even if the new schools are closer to students' homes in some cases (Eden Prairie covers just 6 square miles). Yet lost or ignored in these conversations is research showing that student achievement is often accelerated when schools and classrooms are racially and/or economically diverse. Equally important, students deepen their critical thinking and social skills in these environments, enabling them to succeed in institutions of higher education and increasingly diverse workplaces.

Eden Prairie's choices are drawing national attention. The [National Coalition on School Diversity](#) recently observed that the intensifying demographic shifts across the United States may require «equity-minded local educators to craft policies that upset the status quo in communities that only recently were found more homogeneous.» Suburban schools will have to find new honesty and courage if they are to make all students college- and career-ready. And that could mean following Eden Prairie's example of ensuring non-white and low-income students an equitable education.

U.S. Education Secretary [Arne Duncan](#) recently addressed a longer-running school diversity effort in Wake County, N.C. «One of the things I was so lucky to have as a child was to grow up in a very diverse community and a very diverse school,» he said. «Far too few of those opportunities exist. Our country is actually becoming more segregated, not less.»

Eden Prairie represents both sides of this diversity coin. Bold local leaders who help to build a nation in which diverse groups learn together -- and later thrive on a level playing field -- are on one side. On the other side are those who resist, holding us back as a nation.

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students unconstitutional. Suburban schools have a greater responsibility than ever to resist segregation and ensure that diversity is seen as a link and springboard, not a barrier, to a quality education.

Eden Prairie proves that suburban schools are in a good position to deliver on this goal. The question is: Will they do what it takes?

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