
Why we need to relentlessly pursue diversity in schools - The Answer Sheet

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By Eric J. Cooper

“In education, the road worth traveling.”

The promise of integrated schools began with *Mendez et al v. Westminster School District et al*, a 1946 federal court case that challenged racial segregation in Orange County, Calif. schools. It was followed by *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 landmark case in which the U.S. Supreme Court declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students unconstitutional.

After a period of school desegregation, poorer public schools have become increasingly [re-segregated](#). At least 70 percent of white students attend schools where at least 75 percent of the student body is white, and more than half of all black students attend poor urban schools where 90 percent are members of “minority” groups, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Some might chalk this up to individual choice, though there is significant social science research to suggest that community policies that result in insufficient employment opportunities, segregated housing and transportation patterns are to blame.

Adding to the challenge of integrating school communities are orchestrated initiatives which pump

dollars into such groups as Americans for Prosperity, which then became involved in local school board elections such as [Wake County, N.C.](#), and [Eden Prairie, MN](#), which turned on the question of school segregation.

Yet despite these interventions and shifts in policies, some communities are turning against this tide by sustaining voluntary desegregation initiatives. The West Metro Education Program in Minnesota is an example, with one school district — Eden Prairie — that has become a standout in improved student achievement. The progress is cited on the district’s website:

“Eden Prairie Schools continues to make strides in closing the achievement gap. Between 2008-2011, preliminary MCA Reading results show white student scores have increased 5%; Asian student scores have increased 10%, Latino student scores have increased 12%, Special Education student scores have increased 14%, Black student scores have increased by 21%, Free/Reduced Lunch student scores have increased by 21%, and Limited English student scores have increased by 28%. All our student groups have improved in reading, some by as much as 9% each year and there’s even greater growth for those students who are traditionally underserved. The achievement gap is closing in Eden Prairie Schools.”

Myron Orfield, executive director of the Institute on Race & Poverty and a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., has shared that this is unprecedented achievement.

And as impressive as the gains are, they have not come at the expense of traditionally high-achieving

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students: They, too, continue to make significant progress.

But what ultimately is most important is that all students are learning critical and creative thinking and other so-called higher-order thinking skills. And they are learning in integrated classrooms where diversity is not feared but embraced.

Though the evidence is at times contradictory, a growing body of research suggests students in heterogeneous schools and classrooms may improve their real-world learning. Many parents intuitively understand that it is in the best interest of their children and community to embrace diversity and teaching that instructs all students how to succeed and to compete in a highly competitive world.

The positive achievement data from Eden Prairie would seem to be a nexus for the pride the district hopefully continues to celebrate. Yet, sadly, a few have posted claims on the Washington Post's "Answer Sheet," that "...the policies...enacted attempted to narrow the achievement gap by capping the high end...for the best and brightest students." Again, this interpretation is not supported by the district's data.

I have had the opportunity to visit all of the schools in Eden Prairie. I witnessed a series of transformative differences. I saw educators and students who embraced the diverse learning opportunities desegregation provided. Teachers who applied culturally responsive strategies to address student strengths, rather than weaknesses. Teachers who knew how to engage diverse classrooms in real-world applications, where instruction is student-centered, project-focused, and driven by creativity, problem-solving and sound decision-making. Cultural differences were embraced and used to help formalize deep respect among the students in heterogeneous classrooms. Students learned that focus, effort and col-

laboration enabled them to learn new vocabulary, concepts and content.

As an African-American educator, I also had the honor to speak for two consecutive years as the back-to-school speaker for all of Eden Prairie's predominately white staff, including custodians, secretaries, teachers, principals, administrators, board of education members, parents, civic, faith-based and political leaders, security staff and bus drivers. Not only were the words I shared well received, but also, when they stood as one at the conclusion of one of my speeches, they affirmed the common bond of ensuring the promise of America for all of its citizens — its students and our future leaders.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, America is fast becoming a majority-minority nation, one where the very classification of "minority" soon will become outmoded.

This relentless path to diversity is, in fact, the destiny of our nation — a road we hope is no longer hindered by the limitations of social demography.

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