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MEMORANDUM

To: Controlled Choice Committee
From: Jennifer M. Joaquin
Re: Social Science Research on the Effects of Poverty on Student Achievement
Date: October 13, 1999

We have reviewed and summarized some relevant studies and articles which examine the relationship between poverty and student achievement in the desegregation context in order to assist the Committee in exploring alternatives to the District's current student assignment guidelines:

- I. *Does it Matter Where Poor Kids Live? A Look at Concentrated Poverty and Achievement*, Steven Schellenberg, St. Paul Public Schools (1998)

This two year study examined how poverty affected elementary and middle school students' test scores and absenteeism in a diverse Midwestern urban school district. In this study, the students' poverty levels were measured by receipt of free or reduced-priced lunches and neighborhoods were classified into five economic bands: Extreme Poverty (> 80% free/reduced), Concentrated Poverty (60-80% free/reduced), Moderate Poverty (40%-60% free/reduced), Lower Poverty (20-40% free/reduced), and Affluent (<20% free/reduced). Test scores distributions and absenteeism patterns were then compared among three categories of students (free lunch, reduced-price lunch, and no subsidy) living in each of the five neighborhood types.

Facts about the School District Studied:

60% of students received free and reduced lunches

Racial breakdown: 40% Caucasian
27% Asian
24% African American
7% Hispanic
2% American Indian

A strong school choice program resulted in over 60% of the students attending a school other than their neighborhood school

Findings:

Generally, students from poorer areas of the city had consistently lower test scores and more absenteeism than those from the more affluent neighborhoods. The analysis of neighborhood type yielded two primary results. First at each economic band, the free lunch group scored the lowest on the tests, the reduced-lunch group scored higher, while the non-eligible group scored highest. Second, when all of the neighborhoods' test scores were ranked, there was a steady decline in test scores from the Affluent Neighborhoods to the Extreme Poverty neighborhoods. A subsidiary finding was that the gap between free and non-eligible students decreased as the economic level of the neighborhood declined. In other words, the least difference in test scores is found in the poorest neighborhoods.

With regard to absenteeism, it was highest among free lunch students and lowest among non-eligible students. In addition, absenteeism increased in all student levels as the poverty level of the neighborhood increased. However, the Asian students' absenteeism did not follow these trends; there was no increase in the rate of absenteeism as concentration of poverty increased. Further, absenteeism of Asian students was higher among non-eligible students and lower among students receiving a free or reduced-price lunch.

In this study, differences traceable to the students' economic status alone were approximately equal to the differences traceable to the general economic environment in which the students lived. The demonstrable effect of poverty lends support to efforts to integrate poor neighborhoods with more affluent surrounding areas.

The findings of this study mirrored numerous studies conducted in the 60s, 70s and 80s, which have shown that students attending higher poverty schools were not doing as well as those in less stressed neighborhoods.

II. *Resegregation in American Schools*, Gary Orfield, Harvard Civil Rights Project (June 1999)

This study identified four important trends:

1. The American South is resegregating;
2. Latino students are becoming more segregated as they rapidly become our largest minority group;
3. Large and increasing numbers of Latino and African Americans are enrolling in suburban schools; and
4. There is rapid ongoing change in the racial composition of American schools and the emergence of many schools with three or more racial groups.

In addition to these four trends, the Orfield Report documents trends that specifically address the role socioeconomic status plays in segregation and other relevant factors:

The Class Component of Segregation

Spreading segregation has a strong class component. When Latino and African American students are segregated into schools where a majority of students are non-white, they find themselves in schools where poverty is concentrated.¹ On the other hand, white students who attend majority-white schools are almost always surrounded by students from middle-class families.

Concentrated poverty is linked to lower educational achievement due to variables such as: parent education levels, availability of advanced courses, teachers with specialized credentials, instability of enrollment, dropouts, untreated health problems and lower college entry rates. Students in racially integrated schools are generally in schools with higher levels of academic achievement. When school districts return to neighborhood schools, white students tend to sit next to middle class students while African American and Latino students are likely to be next to impoverished students.

Increase in Multiracial Schools

¹African Americans and Latinos, on average, are in schools where 65% of the students are African American, Latino, or Native American. Asians, on the other hand, tend to be in schools where only 31% of students are African American, Latino, or Native American, and whites attend schools where just 16% are from these groups.

Many schools emerging with types of interracial or multiracial populations (like the District's schools) have received virtually no attention from policy makers or researchers. Students who go to these schools go to schools in highly complex and dynamic environments and whose complex interactions are poorly understood. Hopefully, more researchers and policy makers will address these multi-racial schools, which are commonly found in California.

III. *Minority Achievement: Policy Implications of Research*, Robert L. Crain and Rita E. Mahard (1981)

This report focuses on the achievement test scores of minority students after their schools have been desegregated. Professor Crain found that minority students in predominantly white schools score higher on achievement tests than those minority students in predominantly minority schools and this occurs because predominantly white schools have student bodies with a higher socioeconomic status.

Based on the study, it appears that "metropolitan desegregation plans" (those that transfer minority students from low-income central city neighborhoods to suburban schools in affluent areas) show stronger positive effects of desegregation. These positive effects include an increase on reading comprehension and language arts scores, as well as an increase in IQ test scores. The first rationale behind this finding is that metropolitan desegregation plans represent the most complete form of socioeconomic desegregation since students from low-income families are being transferred into areas that are affluent. The second rationale behind this finding is that suburban school districts have been able to recruit stronger teachers and principals and provide a more effective administrative environment for their schools.

Another finding of this study is that the effectiveness of desegregation in schools is affected by the racial composition of the student body. Various large scale studies have found that African American achievement is directly related to the percentage of White students in the school - the more white students in the school, the higher the minority achievement. This occurrence can be explained in two ways. First, if the main effect of desegregation is to place students from low-income families into schools with affluent students, the more white students, the greater the income level of the school. Second, a smaller African American population makes it more difficult to re-segregate the school by creating an all-minority class of supposedly low-achieving students.

In addition, there seems to be an optimal percentage of white students - when the percentage of white students exceeded 80%, achievement began falling. This finding is related to the theory that an overwhelming white school is a hostile environment for African American students. An overwhelmingly white school may not provide African American students with a sense of being they could get from other minority students and teachers; the African American students may feel like

outsiders which has negative academic results.

Finally, this study demonstrates that the beneficial effects of desegregation take place during the very earliest of primary school grades and students who are desegregated in secondary school do not show the same gains in academic achievement and IQ tests.

IV. *Diversity Effects on Student Outcomes: Social Science Evidence*, Maureen T. Hallinan, Notre Dame (1998)

Professor Hallinan asserts that research demonstrates that family background has a significantly stronger effect on student achievement than any other single school factor, including school racial and ethnic composition. A number of studies consistently find that family income has a greater impact on academic achievement of both African American and white students than does the racial composition of the school.

In addition to Professor Hallinan's comments regarding family income and its role in academic achievement, many of the studies she reviews are consistent with and support the following six related findings:

1. African American students attain higher academic achievement in majority white schools than in predominantly or majority African American schools.
2. African American students attain higher academic achievement in majority white classes than in majority non-white classes.
3. The earlier a African American student is placed in a majority white school or classroom, the higher the student's academic achievement.
4. Hispanic students attain higher academic achievement in majority white schools than in minority white schools
5. White students attain higher academic achievement in majority white schools than in majority African American or Hispanic schools.
6. Cooperative learning techniques increase the achievement of all students in racially and ethnically heterogeneous groups.