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Cambridge, Mass., to desegregate schools based on economics instead of race

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(01-10) 22:21 PST BOSTON (AP) --

When Michela Grunebaum entered kindergarten last September, her race was one of the main factors used to decide which school she would attend.

But when her 3-year-old brother Noah begins classes in a few years, the family's income will be a bigger factor than the boy's skin color.

Officials in Cambridge have approved a plan to begin assigning students to schools based largely on their parents' income instead of the youngsters' race.

The shift puts Cambridge -- the politically liberal city of 100,000 that is the home of Harvard University -- at the forefront of a small but growing nationwide movement supporters say acknowledges what some educators have long suspected: Poverty is a better indicator of poor academic achievement than race.

"It's highly insulting to say that African American or Latino kids need to sit next to whites in order to learn," said Richard Kahlenberg of the Century Foundation, a Washington-based think tank.

"The problem isn't having a school with a majority of students of color; the problem is having a majority of poor kids. The reality is that low-income parents are much less active in schools, and that translates into lower academic achievement."

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In the Cambridge plan, race will be still be a factor, but not the primary one.

Cambridge, which voluntarily desegregated its schools by race in 1980 with a set-up that gives parents some leeway to pick their youngsters' school, is hoping the new plan will fend off legal challenges to the current setup.

More important, school officials say, the new plan promises to raise the performance of students from poor families by exposing them to youngsters whose parents have college aspirations for them.

Some poor children will be sent to schools to be with more children from middle-class and wealthy families. And some well-to-do youngsters will be sent to schools to be with more poor people.

Michela and Noah's father, Eric Grunebaum, a TV producer who is white, said he supports the plan, provided the city works to improve all schools.

"If you're just pushing people into schools that they haven't chosen without seriously addressing the quality of all the schools, it's a mistake," he said.

To determine how segregated the schools are by income, Cambridge officials looked at how many children in each elementary school are enrolled in free lunch programs. The citywide average per school is about 48 percent, but in some schools the rate was as low as 20 percent and in others as high as 88 percent, Superintendent Bobbie D'Alessandro said.

The goal is to bring the number of students in each school enrolled in the free lunch program to within 5 percent of the citywide average.

Cambridge will begin with the kindergarten class entering in September. But because Cambridge has only one high school, the desegregation plan applies only to the city's 7,300 elementary school students, 40 percent of whom are white and 60 percent minority.

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"I feel fairly passionate that we need to equalize the system and this is a good way to do this," said Rick Colbath-Hess, a 42-year-old white social worker who has two children in the Cambridge schools and whose wife is a third-grade teacher. "I think there are going to be many cities watching us. If it works it will be copied."

Although the program won the unanimous support of the school board, some parents fear it will lead to white flight and a "dumbing down" of classroom instruction for the benefit of the poor youngsters.

Maria Hanlon, 38, has children in the fifth and sixth grade and said the new system could lead to more families pulling their kids out because they will not be able to place them in the most desirable schools.

"It's just one more misguided effort unless most schools present a viable option for more families," said Hanlon, who works in real estate.

One of the first communities to try economic desegregation was La Crosse, Wis., in 1992. Since then, other cities, including San Francisco and Charlotte and Raleigh, N.C., have adopted similar plans, according to Kahlenberg.

Jerry Kember, superintendent of the 7,800-student La Crosse system, said test scores at both of its regular high schools have improved.

"When you put poor children among only other poor children, they lose vision of what's possible," he said. "When they come back from summer vacation, they don't hear stories of vacations in Europe."

He said the program is also helping students from wealthier families: "They understand the human condition for others when they go to school with kids of all backgrounds and from all parts of town."

In Cambridge, the changes were driven in part by court decisions such as the 1998 ruling that

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struck down the race-based admissions policy at Boston Latin, the city's most selective public school.

Cambridge's plan is "the right way to move. I think the issue is really poverty," said state Education Commissioner David Driscoll. "I'm anxious to see how Cambridge makes out. I think it will be slow, but I think there will be a movement toward that."

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