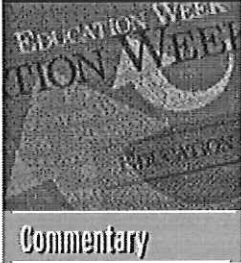


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## Economic School Desegregation

By Richard D. Kahlenberg

On Feb. 16 of this year, parties in a San Francisco lawsuit reached an extraordinary settlement replacing a long-standing racial-desegregation scheme for schools with a new and creative compromise that emphasizes integration of students by economic status. ("San Francisco Desegregation Decree To End," Feb. 24, 1999.)

San Francisco's groundbreaking plan.

San Francisco's groundbreaking economic-desegregation plan satisfies the short-term goals of the litigants--creating a student-assignment system that avoids racial quotas, passes constitutional muster, yet also maintains a degree of racial diversity in the schools, given the connection between racial and economic status.

But far more important, the plan forthrightly addresses what educators and sociologists have long known to be the single greatest impediment to equal educational opportunity: concentrations of school poverty. The plan explicitly recognizes, once and for all, that separate schools for rich and poor are inherently unequal. As racial-desegregation plans are jettisoned in city after city, San Francisco's innovative economic plan may foreshadow a new, more potent, and durable form of school integration for the 21st century.

Since 1983, San Francisco schools have operated under a desegregation consent decree that capped the enrollment of each of nine racial and ethnic groups at 45 percent in any school (40 percent in magnet schools). In 1994, Chinese-American families challenged the decree as discriminatory, since it limited enrollment of Chinese-Americans at Lowell High School, an elite admissions-based public school. The suit also challenged the use of race in assignment to nonselective K-12 public schools, calling into question not only the affirmative action program at Lowell, but also the entire districtwide school desegregation effort.

As an affirmative action case, Lowell's admissions policy presented a difficult public-policy dilemma, pitting strong arguments from both sides. On the one hand, the Chinese-American families who challenged the cap on their admissions exposed the potential unfairness of affirmative action: In a multicultural society, those who lose out under diversity policies are not always privileged white males. In this case, the victims were sympathetic Chinese-American applicants, who actually had to score higher than whites in order to be admitted. On the other hand, the superintendent of schools, Waldemar Rojas, was correct to say that black and Latino families are disproportionately "denied the means to achieve" because they "often" come from lower-income families, and that

admitting students on the basis of test scores alone was not a completely accurate measure of merit.

The new system, emphasizing preferences to Lowell High on the basis of economic disadvantage itself, answers both claims. It ends discrimination against Chinese-Americans based on race, and yet it provides a leg up to the disadvantaged of all races who deserve special consideration. Preferences for the poor will also disproportionately benefit Latinos and African-Americans, who are disproportionately poor, and bring greater racial diversity than a system of admissions based on test scores alone. At the University of California, Los Angeles, law school, which has employed a sophisticated definition of disadvantage, economic preferences have boosted black, Latino, and Native American enrollment five times above what it would have been under a strict system of admissions based solely on academic record.

San Francisco's consideration of socioeconomic status also makes sense in the broader context of school desegregation at nonselective schools. From an equal-opportunity standpoint, the problem in public schools today is not concentrations of racial groups so much as concentrations of poverty. While it is highly insulting and wrong to say that predominantly black schools are inherently inferior or that blacks need to sit next to whites in order to learn, it is also true that if we educate rich and poor students in separate schools, the schools with high concentrations of poverty are invariably of lower quality. The data unmistakably show that in high-poverty schools--of any racial makeup--a given student will do worse academically than if she attends a predominantly middle-class school. Indeed, one study found students from poor families attending middle-class schools do better on average than middle-class students attending high-poverty schools.

The extra needs poor students often bring to school can effectively overwhelm schools with large numbers of needy kids. Nationally, progressives have given up on racial and economic desegregation, preferring (in the words of Brown University's Michael Alves) to "make *Plessy* work"--alluding to the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision that allowed "separate but equal" public facilities--by attacking inequality in education in piecemeal fashion. If high-poverty schools don't work, give them extra money in compensatory funding. If the curriculum is watered down, try to raise standards. If teachers in such schools are underqualified, improve teacher training. Each of these individual initiatives is worthy of support, but even if they are all enacted, at the end of the day, we can achieve far greater equality of opportunity by directly addressing the fountainhead from which school inequality flows: economic segregation. High-poverty schools, even with extra funding, are inherently problematic because a school's quality is determined less by per capita spending than by its students, parents, and teachers. Consider the impact of each:

- *Classmates.* A good school requires a student culture that values learning and achievement and high aspirations. Kids learn from one another, providing what has been called a "hidden curriculum." To take one concrete example, students

expand their vocabularies when exposed to classmates who know more words than they do; yet in high-poverty schools, most classmates come to school with a very limited lexicon. Peers may actively denigrate achievement in high-poverty schools, where classmates are twice as likely to cut classes and three times as likely to engage in misbehavior as students in middle-class schools. The extra needs poor students often bring to school can effectively overwhelm schools with large numbers of needy kids.

- *Parents.* Parental involvement is crucial to a school's success, yet studies dating back 50 years find that poor parents are much less likely to be involved in their children's schools, for a variety of reasons, than parents who are better-off. In high-poverty schools, parents are four times less likely to be members of the PTA and are not in a position to donate private resources or to apply pressure to ensure that public resources are directed to the school.
- *Teachers.* If life were fair, poor kids would get the best teachers. But in fact, because poor kids are harder to teach and the parents are less assertive, kids in high-poverty schools tend to have the weakest teachers. Teachers in high-poverty schools are four times as likely as those in other schools to teach out of field, and generally have the poorest test scores. Expectations are low: Students earning A's in high-poverty schools achieve at about the same level as students earning C's in middle-class schools.

These differences among students, parents, and teachers correlate far more strongly with class than with race. More than 30 years ago, James S. Coleman's national survey of schools found that blacks achieved more in integrated schools, but that the "beneficial effect of a student body with a high proportion of white students comes not from racial composition per se but from the better educational background and higher educational aspirations that are, on the average, found among whites."

Historically, in San Francisco and other cities across the country, progressives have not attacked poverty concentrations and have focused on racial desegregation instead, in part because the 14th Amendment has been read to address segregation by race but not by class. Today, however, as conservative courts increasingly declare school districts to be adequately desegregated, the continued use of race to address *de facto* segregation is itself being struck down. Ironically, the fact that economic segregation was never found unconstitutional means that voluntary measures addressed to class are constitutionally permissible. Today, school districts are beginning to turn directly to the socioeconomic factors that the Coleman Report, and countless other studies since then, have found to be the most salient in determining a school's quality.

San Francisco is considering an array of socioeconomic considerations to use in school assignments, including parental education, income, and neighborhood. (Under the settlement agreement, the district has until October to come up with a precise formula.) Children with parents who did not attend college and children who receive free or reduced-price lunch, live in public housing, or live in high-poverty neighborhoods may be integrated with more-affluent students. The degree to which race can

continue to be used as a minor factor is unclear, and the agreement contains contradictory language on this point.

In devising an economic-desegregation plan, San Francisco can draw on the experience of La Crosse, Wis., which in 1992 redrew elementary school boundaries to better balance the free-lunch student population. Other districts now using economic status in student assignments, or discussing its use, include Montgomery County, Md.; Cambridge, Mass.; Jefferson County (Louisville), Ky.; Charleston, S.C.; Manchester, Conn.; St. Petersburg, Fla.; and Murfreesboro, Tenn.

In San Francisco, the economic-desegregation compromise was forged by such divergent forces as an NAACP looking for racially integrated schools; Chinese-American plaintiffs and a California state school board looking for race neutrality; and a federal judge trying not to run afoul of the U.S. Constitution. While the discussions focused on race, the compromise predates *Brown v. Board of Education*, reaching back to Horace Mann's 19th-century ideal of the "common school," attended by students from all economic backgrounds. San Francisco's new frontier in school desegregation, making "common schools" common, revives a long-dormant but very American idea--one that represents the single best way of redeeming public schools as engines for social mobility.

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