



School Integration in New Jersey

On May 17, 2018, plaintiffs sued the state of New Jersey over the extreme levels of racial and economic segregation in our public schools. We applaud the goals of this action but believe a meaningful response to this yawning problem requires more than a legal remedy. It calls for a broad-based and multi-racial response involving community leaders from across the state in education, faith, labor, civil rights, law and local government. The following are a set of principles to consider in shaping a legislative remedy that is morally just, meaningfully transformative, economically sound, and politically sustainable.

1. A remedy must involve everyone

- ***All school districts bear some responsibility and have a role to play in solving the problem of school segregation in New Jersey.***
 - *All districts, schools, and classrooms should better reflect the diversity of their regions and the state as a whole.*
 - *A remedy should involve a combined approach and employ multiple tools for achieving inclusion goals for every district and classroom.*
 - *Tools should include: school funding, intra-district enrollment, magnet schools, district and classroom level strategies and fair housing.*
 - *A remedy should avoid short-term quick-fixes, especially ones that settle for costly expenditures in lieu of true inclusion.*

2. Don't blame the victim

- ***New Jersey's high poverty and racially isolated communities did not create segregation and their students did not choose it.***
 - *They should not be asked to bear the burden of fixing it financially or otherwise.*
 - *Segregation is a structure of external exclusion. A remedy should not seek to "disburse" or "distribute" students. Instead, it should aim to remove any and all obstacles to mobility, and maximize regional access to opportunity.*

3. Not all suburban and urban districts are the same

- ***School districts in New Jersey are more than just white and black, rich and poor, urban and suburban.***
 - *A remedy must recognize the significant differences in communities based on racial, ethnic and economic demographics of the students and the relative fiscal capacity (tax base) of school district (not just the wealth of the residents).*
 - *Students from disadvantaged and segregated neighborhoods should get priority placement in the most advantaged districts.ⁱ*
 - *A remedy should employ a regional "opportunity index" ⁱⁱ that establishes fair inclusion goals based on current fiscal capacity and racial and economic diversity. Regional opportunity indexing can discern the varying levels of integration needed to meet inclusion goals.*

4. Diverse districts are an important part of the answer

- ***A significant number of mostly (but not only) suburban school districts are increasingly diverse.*** ⁱⁱⁱ
 - *Districts should be recognized for their relative diversity and supported in meaningful efforts to promote integration and inclusion within their communities, schools and classrooms.*
 - *Best practices, lessons learned, and ongoing challenges in diverse school districts should inform the remedy.*
 - *Care must be taken not to place the greatest burden on the already overburdened high property tax school districts.*

5. Leverage existing programs and structures

- ***The School Funding Reform Act of 2008*** (when fully funded) does much to incentivize diversity and integration. But it can do more.
 - *State aid should prioritize increasingly diverse and fiscally strained (high property tax) districts.*
 - *funding should support programs, curriculum and strategies that foster inclusion and learning within districts, schools and classrooms.*
 - *Segregated districts should not be penalized - either through the loss of funding or the mobility of their students.*
- ***New Jersey's Interdistrict Public School Choice Program*** does not (in its current form) promote inclusion and integration. But it can be improved.
 - *This program can be reformed to open enrollment in low poverty / low diversity communities for students coming from high poverty / segregated districts and neighborhoods.*
- ***New Jersey's Fair Housing Act and Mount Laurel program*** can and should be included in goals for school and classroom integration.
- ***COAH (Council on Affordable Housing) Regions***^{iv} represent a much more racially and economically diverse and balanced "community of interest" than counties or clusters of districts.

6. Do no harm

- ***The best intentions often bring unintended and harmful consequences.***
 - *County or multi-district consolidation may improve efficiencies but it will do little to address integration and could make matters worse. Countywide (or smaller) structures will not capture a diverse enough area to significantly impact segregation patterns.*
 - *Simply removing district boundaries would accelerate white flight and deepen segregation. Open enrollment should be guided by an "opportunity index". Students from the most disadvantaged neighborhoods should have priority placement in the most advantaged districts.*
 - *Magnet schools should be a part of the solution but care must be taken to avoid a new layer of exclusivity and exclusion that can leave neighborhood schools more isolated and further behind.*
 - *Magnets, as well as charter schools, have to meet meaningful goals for reflecting the economic and racial mix of their region and the state not the municipality they are located in.*

7. School integration will not fix all problems

- ***We recognize that this is only a part of a larger problem***
 - *Reducing school segregation is not a substitute for ending residential segregation, economic inequality and racial discrimination*
 - *It is a part of the problem and a part we can do something about.*

ⁱ Advantaged districts are school districts with little economic and racial diversity but with low poverty and high opportunity indicators based on a regional opportunity index.

ⁱⁱ A Metropolitan Opportunity Index (MOI) measures the “geography of opportunity” rating each municipality against its neighbors within COAH-specified regions. The rating inputs for each municipality are a) total jobs on-site and job trends over the past two decades, b) FARM percentage and trends over the past two decades, c) assessed valuation per capita for the most recent year available (as a proxy for the level and quality of municipal services), and d) median family income and family poverty rate from the most recent five-year American Community Survey (a measure of a municipality’s overall socioeconomic status).

ⁱⁱⁱ A recent study of schools in New Jersey from the Center for Diversity and Equality in Education titled [the New Promise of School Integration and the Old Problem of Extreme Segregation: an Action Plan for New Jersey](#) reports that nearly a quarter of public school students are in districts “proportional” to the demographics of the state. It further identified a significant correlation between diversity and an array of educational outcomes where the “more proportional schools are to the state’s demographic profile, the higher the graduation rates, college matriculation rates, ELA proficiency rates, and math proficiency rates are and the lower the dropout rates are”.

^{iv} Housing region” means a geographic area, determined by the Council on Affordable Housing, of no less than two and no more than four contiguous, whole counties, which exhibits significant social, economic, and income similarities and which constitutes, to the greatest extent practicable, a Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA) as last defined by the United States Census Bureau.