

Report: Even in more diverse districts, school segregation still exists

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While K-12 schools across Massachusetts are looking at options for reopening this fall in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new report says

public schools should also be looking at another important issue for their future: diversity.

A team of researchers led by Jack Schneider, assistant professor in UMass Lowell's College of Education, has just released a report that found the K-12 student population in Massachusetts has become more racially diverse over the last decade.

Although the number of predominantly white schools has decreased, the research noted that this "has also coincided with an uptick..." in the number of intensely segregated schools in the Commonwealth. Perhaps not surprisingly, the vast majority of intensely segregated non-white schools are concentrated in larger urban districts like Boston and Springfield. At the same time, these districts are home to many of the most racially integrated schools in the region. Moreover, of the nine districts with intensely segregated non-white schools, six possess the districtwide demography to produce uniformly diverse schools. Thus, we are disturbed by the state of racial diversity in Massachusetts schools, but we also see a hopeful path forward," the report states.

"I was drawn to the topic because I care deeply about integration across our society and I believe the most promising way to realize that vision is through the schools," Schneider said of his work on the report. "Looking at the present pandemic, I think it underscores the importance of integration in terms of ensuring the adequate distribution of resources. If the most politically and economically privileged families are in the same schools as those who are marginalized, their own self-interested advocacy will benefit those who need it most. That's a fairly unromantic argument for integrated schools, but it also recognizes the reality that Americans have long used schools as a way of securing privileges that aren't broadly distributed."

The report's findings include "students of color are disproportionately

represented in the lowest-rated quintile of schools, as determined by the Massachusetts accountability system. Similarly, we find that schools in the lowest quintile are also considerably less white than the average [school](#) in the Commonwealth. At first blush, this might suggest that racially diverse schools are 'low-performing' relative to their predominantly white counterparts. Yet, the existing research literature suggests otherwise (The Century Foundation, 2016; Hallinan, 1998; Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012; National Academy of Education, 2007; Orfield, 2004)." Instead, it states that the explanation may be issues within the state's accountability framework, "which relies heavily on data from standardized tests. Insofar as standardized test scores often indicate more about demography than school quality, the existing accountability system may be promoting segregation by steering middle- and high-income white families toward predominantly white schools."

The report looked at data from schools across Massachusetts and focused on nine districts more specifically, including Boston and Springfield.

In addition to the findings, the report offers a number of possible solutions to the issues it uncovered, including looking at new means of measuring accountability in schools.

Schneider, in addition to teaching at UMass Lowell, leads the Beyond Test Scores Project and co-hosts an education-focused podcast, "Have You Heard." He is an authority on K-12 public education.

The collaborators on the report include Peter Piazza of Penn State's Center for Education and Civil Rights and Rachel White of Old Dominion, along with Ashley Carey, who is pursuing her Ph.D. in leadership in education at UMass Lowell.

"I come to this topic out of a concern about the racial division that

characterizes American social life and, as we see daily, American politics, and I think that integrated schools hold a promise/potential for healing that division," said Piazza. "And, in terms of its connection to COVID (and the racial justice crisis as well), I think it highlights that we shouldn't be trying to 'go back to normal,' but should instead be seeking new policies that address the racial inequities that have been amplified by both crises. The same is true of the question about going back to school—since resources typically follow white students, intensely segregated non-white schools may lack the infrastructure, safety gear, etc. required to open safely this fall, so another way the pandemic disproportionately affects communities of color."

"I am passionate about this work because I think the strength of the connection between [civil rights](#) and [educational opportunity](#) cannot be overstated, and it is imperative that work like this continues to inform conversations about the value of integrated schools to a diversifying nation. As our communities become increasingly diverse, schools that are integrated provide students with the opportunity to learn from, respect, and build up and support their peers in ways that will inform how they treat others in our diverse society once they are outside of school walls—including how they think about advocating for and using their voice to uplift the underserved and historically marginalized through participation in democratic processes. As it relates to our current pandemic, the findings from the study emphasize the importance of integration of schools as it relates to equitable access and distribution of resources necessary to not only access necessary educational experiences, but also to live and thrive in American society," said White.

Provided by University of Massachusetts Lowell

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