

REDISTRICTING

School Zoning and Diversity: A Primer

Many school districts in the U.S. assign students to schools based on where they live within the district, resulting in what are often called ‘neighborhood’ or ‘community’ schools. However, communities with racially segregated housing patterns that assign students to schools based solely on geographic proximity often produce racially isolated schools. For example, many districts that have adopted neighborhood based plans that eliminated any use of race have found a rise in racial isolation because many communities still have segregated neighborhoods. Decisions about where to assign students and how best to adjust attendance boundaries are often politically charged, and encouraging racial diversity is often one of several important goals that school officials keep in mind as they balance various interests. Today, districts around the country are making school siting or closing decisions and many are considering district consolidation and redistricting, particularly as the suburban population continues to expand. As a result, it is important that each of these decisions is made with effective strategies in mind to increase and/or maintain racial diversity and prevent unintentional resegregation.

What is the current legal landscape of voluntary school integration?

Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District and Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education challenged the voluntary integration plans in Seattle, Washington and Louisville, Kentucky; however, there are important facts to consider:

- While the Court placed limits on the ability of school districts to take race into account, it did not rule out all consideration of race in student assignment.
- A majority of Supreme Court justices held that promoting diversity and avoiding racial isolation in schools are compelling national interests that school districts can and should pursue.
- School districts have broad latitude to consider factors other than race, such as socioeconomic status, whether a student lives in a particular neighborhood, or parental education level in assigning students to school. Furthermore, Justice Kennedy explicitly recognized that school districts have a compelling interest in promoting diversity and avoiding racial isolation in schools.

Segregation on the Rise: Why is it important to consider racial diversity when redistricting?

- The U.S. has been experiencing a period of steady increase in segregation since the late 1980s at national, regional, and district levels, reversing much of the early success that led to several decades of desegregated schooling.
- Approximately 2.4 million students--including one in six of both Black and Latino students-- attend hypersegregated schools in which the student population is 99-100% students of color.
- Whites are the most isolated group of students in the U.S., with the typical White public school student attending a school that is more than three-quarters White. What are some of the benefits of integrated schools?

Black and Latino students who attend integrated schools have higher academic achievement than those students who attend schools with predominately Black and Latino students.

- Higher student aspirations resulting from integrated schools have been linked to higher expectations of students within integrated schools.

- Once children from desegregated environments reach adulthood, they tend to live and work in more integrated settings.
- Students who attend diverse schools have higher comfort levels with members of racial/ethnic groups different from their own, an increased sense of civic engagement, and a greater desire to live and work in multiracial settings.
- Employers benefit when the future workforce has been educated in integrated schools and are experienced in working across racial lines.

What are some common redistricting methods to promote integration?

Methods that were explicitly recognized by Justice Kennedy as permissible race-conscious approaches to voluntary integration:

- Drawing and Adjustment of School Attendance Boundaries--Each time school districts assign student assignment zones, there is an opportunity to consider student demographics to ensure racially integrated student populations.
- Siting of new schools--school districts can attempt to place new schools in locations that are likely to create racially diverse schools.

While not explicitly endorsed by Justice Kennedy, these methods are similar to the approaches above, as they do not take race into account for individual students:

- School Pairing/Grade Realignment--Two adjacent schools that have different racial compositions of students can be merged and their attendance areas redrawn in order to ensure racially integrated student populations.
- Multi-District Consolidation--Regions encompassing several different school systems can consolidate their school districts to create a single district to promote racially diverse student populations.

Methods that generally take individual student characteristics into account¹:

- Student Transfers--Schools can establish voluntary student transfer programs designed to promote integration and/or reduce racial isolation.
- Inter-District Transfer Program--School districts can team up with neighboring districts to achieve voluntary integration through inter-district transfer programs.

As districts attempt to adopt methods that promote racial diversity in schools, there will likely be those who are strongly opposed to the idea. The recent fervor, for example, in Wake County, NC and Charlotte, NC against student assignment plans focused on achieving racial diversity has resulted in divided communities. In contrast, with effective leadership, an informed citizenry, and a strategic plan to create racially balanced schools, Rock Hill, SC and Louisville, KY have been successful in designing plans that promote racially balanced schools. These districts demonstrate that even with the Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved* (2007), school districts have latitude in designing and implementing effective strategies that promote racial diversity, providing both academic and social benefits to its students and society.

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 1 An individual student's race should not be the sole factor considered in whether a transfer is granted or a student is accepted into a special program. Instead, if and when an individual student's race is considered, it should be—at minimum—as one of many components in a “nuanced, individual evaluation of school needs and student characteristics,” as Justice Kennedy explained.