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# Voluntary Integration in U.S. School Districts, 2000–2015

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## Voluntary Integration in U.S. School Districts, 2000-2015: District Approaches and Segregation Outcomes<sup>1</sup>

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Scores of school districts across the U.S. are engaged in the important work of voluntary racial and income integration of schools. Since the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954, research has established the academic and social benefits of integrated schooling for students of all racial/ethnic backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> These findings inform districts' efforts about the importance of integrating schools. In contrast to the past when the federal government was involved in the mandatory desegregation of schools, today it is often up to local communities, districts, and schools to voluntarily take on the important task of integration.

Today, we lack a comprehensive understanding of which districts across the U.S. are currently implementing voluntary integration plans nor do we know specifics about their policy design. There are many possible avenues to increase school diversity, from the use of magnet schools, to altering attendance boundaries, and choice with civil rights safeguards, among many other options. Understanding what methods are used, to what extent, and where, will help inform districts, advocates, and researchers about possible integration options. It is also critical to measure the levels of racial and free and reduced lunch (FRL) segregation within those districts in order to understand the patterns of segregation over time where voluntary integration is occurring. This brief reflects preliminary findings from our ongoing study of districts engaged in voluntary integration.

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1. If your school district is using a voluntary integration plan and would like to help with our research or would like additional information on our project please contact Jeremy Anderson at [jqa5378@psu.edu](mailto:jqa5378@psu.edu), Kendra Taylor at [kat5123@psu.edu](mailto:kat5123@psu.edu), or Dr. Erica Frankenberg at [euf10@psu.edu](mailto:euf10@psu.edu).

2. Hanushek, E. A., Kain, J. F., & Rivkin, S. G. (2009). New evidence about *Brown v. Board of Education*: The complex effects of school racial composition on achievement. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 27(3), 349; Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751-783; Stearns, E. (2010). Long-term correlates of high school racial composition: Perpetuation theory reexamined. *Teachers College Record*, 112(6), 1654.

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## Contemporary Context for Voluntary Integration

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Prior to the 1954 *Brown* decision, eleven states required and seven states permitted segregation of public elementary and secondary schools. The U.S. Supreme Court along with federal agencies and Congress increasingly required districts across the South to implement more far-reaching desegregation efforts and the South became the most integrated region of the country for black and white students. While the Supreme Court in more recent years had made it easier for districts to end court oversight of desegregation, these cases had applied to what districts were **required** to do to remedy prior segregation. A decade ago, in its *Parents Involved* decision, the Court struck down the **voluntarily** adopted integration policies of two districts because of a concern that they used an individual student's race/ethnicity in deciding whether to grant student assignment choices. Importantly, part of the Court's analysis held that the **goals** of the districts' integration policy were compelling governmental interests specifically in reducing or eliminating racial isolation and creating diverse schools. Additionally, one of the opinions in the fractured decision outlined possible ways districts could achieve these goals that would be constitutionally permissible.

Yet, in the aftermath of the decision, it was unclear **whether** race could be used at all, and if so in what ways. For example, while assigning students to a school because of his/her race to have a certain percentage of students from different racial groups is no longer permitted, other race-conscious options exist. Drawing attendance boundaries for schools while being cognizant of the demographics of neighborhoods is one such example outlined in *Parents Involved*. Another permissible means is considering the racial and economic diversity of students' neighborhoods instead of their individual race/ethnicity in granting student choices in school assignments. These legal shifts, however, have left educators unclear about whether and under what conditions permissible strategies are **effective**.

Although voluntary integration is necessarily led by local governments, in recent years, the federal government has supported these local efforts. In 2011, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice jointly released guidance for school districts about their

interpretation of *Parents Involved* and outlined examples of methods of student assignment, including the use of race, that would fall within the new legal parameters. The guidance described a decision-making process for districts to undergo including key steps in implementing to help districts pursue their goal of advancing diversity and/or reducing racial isolation.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education included diversity priorities in a range of competitive grant programs for school districts and charter schools, and announced a federal grant competition called Opening Doors to support districts in increasing diversity, which the Administration identified as helping to achieve other educational goals like student achievement.<sup>4</sup>

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## Districts in the U.S. Engaged in Voluntary Integration

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To date we have identified 60 districts with voluntary integration policies, narrowed from an initial list of 111 districts.<sup>5</sup> To be included on our list of districts, we gathered publicly available documents about district policies, and interviewed district officials to understand not only the voluntary integration method that the district was using but also the extent to which that method addressed integration by either socioeconomic status (SES) or race. More than 3.5 million students are enrolled in the districts that employ some type of voluntary integration student assignment policy. These districts are disproportionately higher in students of color and students eligible for free/reduced lunch (Table 1).

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3. Guidance on the voluntary use of race to achieve diversity and avoid racial isolation in elementary and secondary schools. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/guidance-ese-201111.html>.

4. For more information on the Opening Doors, Expanding Opportunity grant program as announced, see <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/odeo/index.html>.

5. We appreciate district officials who we interviewed as well as experts in this area who answered our queries, especially Halley Potter. At this time, our study does not include charter schools focusing on diversity. The sites for this study were compiled using existing, albeit conflicting research about which districts have been implementing voluntary integration. See Kahlenberg, R.D. (2011). Socioeconomic school integration: Preliminary lessons from more than 80 districts. In Frankenberg, E. & E. DeBray (Eds.) *Integrating schools in a changing society: New policies and legal options for a multiracial generation*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press; Potter, H., Quick, K., & Davies, E. (2016). *A new wave of school integration*. Retrieved from <https://tcf.org/content/report/a-new-wave-of-school-integration/>; Reardon, S.F. & Rhodes, L. (2011). The effects of socioeconomic integration policies on racial school desegregation. In E. Frankenberg & E. Debray (Eds.) *Integrating schools in a changing society: New policies and legal options for a multiracial generation*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

*Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Voluntarily Integrating School Districts and All School Districts, 2014-15*

	<b>Total Students</b>	<b>FRL Students</b>	<b>Hispanic Students</b>	<b>White Students</b>	<b>Black Students</b>	<b>Asian Students</b>
Voluntarily Integrating Districts (n=60)	3,541,558	64.8%	38.9%	27.2%	24.7%	5.4%
All U.S. Districts	49,584,244	51.9%	25.9%	49.3%	15.3%	5.2%

Source: NCES Common Core of Data, 2014-15

The sites in this study represent school districts from 25 states and the District of Columbia. They include rural, suburban, and urban locales with a wide range of student enrollment demographics. These voluntary integration policies are nuanced, and (in some cases) under revision.<sup>6</sup> Districts use a variety of voluntary integration methods, including using more than one type of approach (Table 2). Districts also use varying dimension(s) of diversity in their policies (Table 3).

*Table 2: Voluntary Integration Methods\**

<b>Integration Method</b>	<b>Count</b>
Controlled Choice	15
Transfers	18
Attendance Zones	20
Magnet Schools	20
Multiple Methods	15
Interdistrict Transfer	7

*Table 3: Dimensions of Integration\**

<b>Diversity Definition</b>	<b>Count</b>
Using SES	47
Using Race	23

\*Note: Number of districts is more than 60 as some districts are counted in more than one category.

The two most popular methods of voluntary integration are adjustments to attendance zone boundaries and magnet school admissions. Attendance zones can be useful in addressing segregation because they affect all students in a district but they

6. It's worth noting the difficulty that we had finding and understanding board policies of some school districts. At times policies were written ambiguously, unavailable due to a broken website, or were not posted at all. Additionally, during the last year, some policies have disappeared from the web. This could present a significant challenge for a family trying to discern how their student is assigned to a school or their school choice options.

are important to monitor over time to ensure that zones don't become more segregated. Magnet school admissions often include priority weighting of applicants on certain dimensions of diversity. For instance, Polk County Public Schools in Florida uses a combination of weights in predetermined magnet zones (initial zones created to balance diversity factors by residential address) that include race, SES, percent of students with disabilities, and English Language Learners.<sup>7</sup> Boulder Valley, Colorado uses a combination of family income and free and reduced lunch status as a socioeconomic weight in applying to three magnet schools. We've identified 15 school districts that are using multiple integration methods to achieve greater diversity. Ector County Independent School District in Texas defines diversity using seven factors that include SES and in some instances race. They use this composite definition to monitor attendance zone boundaries, evaluate magnet school admissions, and approve transfer requests.<sup>8</sup> This is noteworthy because these plans can be more complex, but provide choice to communities while also affecting the assignment of all students through various methods. Many of these approaches design school choice in such a way that it not only increases family options, but at the same time increases school diversity.

Another important component of contemporary integration efforts is the wide range of racial and/or socioeconomic definitions of "diversity". Though this study primarily addresses SES and race, other indicators were present such as academic performance and students with disabilities. Beyond the variations in defining diversity itself, there were differences in measuring "race" and "socioeconomic status." Socioeconomic status was used exclusively by a vast majority of the districts in our study (Table 4). Many districts are using solely free and reduced lunch eligibility as an indicator of a student who may be socioeconomically disadvantaged. We could not determine how the second largest group of districts explicitly defined their use of "socioeconomic status." The smallest group of districts use multiple indicators of SES. For instance, the Chicago Public School District uses six census tract indicators of SES (median family income, adult educational attainment, the percentage of single parent households, the percentage of home ownership,

7. Polk County Public Schools Magnet and Choice Information: <http://www.polkfl.net/districtinfo/departments/school-based/schoolchoice/magnetchoice.htm>

8. Ector County Public Schools Board Policy: <http://pol.tasb.org/Policy/Section/421?filter=F>

the percentage of the population that speaks a language other than English; and a school performance variable related to a student’s home school).<sup>9</sup> They then use this data to divide the district into quadrants. Berkeley Unified School District uses household income and educational attainment of “planning areas” in conjunction with race and ethnicity to develop a composite diversity map for their controlled choice student assignment plan.<sup>10</sup>

Table 4: Defining Socioeconomic Status

Definitions of SES	Count
FRL only	25
FRL + other Factors	4
SES undefined or unclear	14

## Racial and Income Segregation of Districts Engaged in Voluntary Integration

We use the segregation measure Theil’s H (H) to measure racial and FRL segregation in the school districts that are undertaking voluntary integration.<sup>11</sup> This measure indicates the average racial/income diversity of schools in a district compared to the racial/income diversity of the entire school district.<sup>12</sup> If the schools’ racial/income diversity, on average, is similar to the districts’ racial/income diversity, then there is very little school segregation within that district (H would be close to 0). Conversely, if the schools’ racial/income diversity, on average, differs from the districts’ racial/income diversity, then there is a greater magnitude of school segregation within that district (higher values of H). Data analyzed is from the NCES Common Core of Data from 2000 to 2015.

9. Chicago Public Schools Policy Manual: <http://policy.cps.edu/download.aspx?ID=82>

10. Berkeley Unified School District Student Assignment Plan: <http://www.berkeleyschools.net/information-on-berkeley-unifieds-student-assignment-plan/>

11. We build on the work of Reardon & Rhodes (2011) who use H to understand the patterns of racial and FRL segregation over time in school districts that were determined to be engaged in voluntary integration. H simultaneously assesses all racial groups under study in one index. However, it has potential drawbacks as a segregation measure, particularly related to its insensitivity to the racial composition of the units under study and its inability to capture interracial contact. See Orfield, G., Siegel-Hawley, G. & Kuscera, J. (2014). *Sorting out deepening confusion on segregation trends*. Los Angeles: Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles.

12. The value of H ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 representing complete integration (the racial/income composition of the schools is the same as the district as a whole) and 1 representing complete segregation (one race/income level schools).



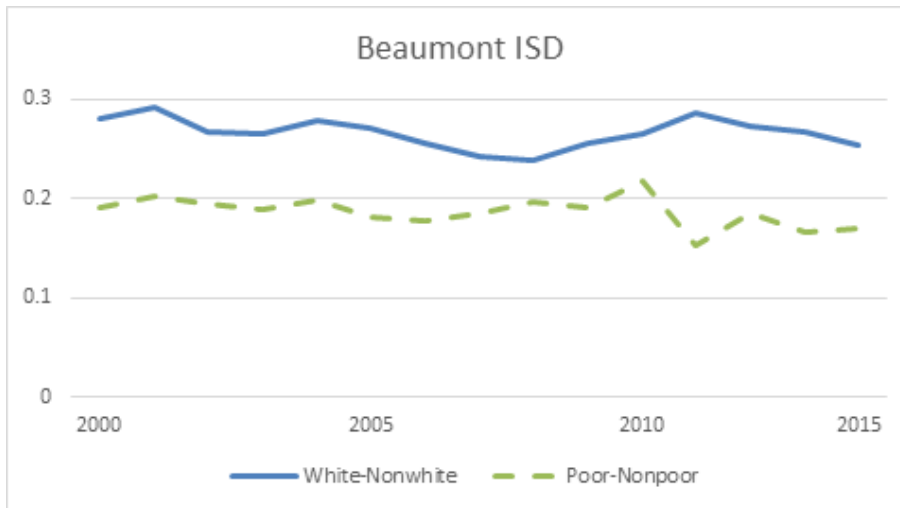
We examine segregation from school year 2000-01 through school year 2014-15 in districts implementing voluntary integration, and illustrate six such districts here. Across the U.S. in recent decades there has been an increase in racial segregation of schools and income segregation of schools.<sup>13</sup> In the districts engaged in voluntary integration we find that, on average, racial segregation increased and income segregation decreased from 2000 to 2015. Overall, in the 60 districts under study, the average school-level racial segregation increased by 1.2 percentage points during the time under study. In contrast, the average school-level FRL segregation decreased by 3 percentage points during the period under study. Moreover, FRL segregation was slightly lower than racial composition in these districts in 2014-15. The average segregation patterns in the districts under study track national patterns of increasing racial segregation, but diverge from the national pattern in terms of decreasing income segregation. This is not surprising as most of the districts that are voluntarily integrating do so using race-neutral policies, often based on socioeconomic characteristics. However, there are substantial variations in segregation patterns between the districts and a focus of our research is seeking to understand the patterns of individual districts based on the integration method used.

Below we highlight segregation in six districts that shows the different approaches districts use to integrate students, most often by SES and less often by race. The districts also demonstrate that there is wide variation in levels of racial and income segregation in the districts under study. Each of the six districts below is highlighted because it has a different primary method used for integration, and we note whether the district uses socioeconomic indicators, race-conscious indicators, or both. The district that made the greatest declines in both racial and income segregation is Boulder Valley, which primarily uses socioeconomic characteristics as part of magnet school admissions. Berkeley Unified had the largest declines in income segregation, with a small increase in racial segregation (though already quite low), using race-conscious controlled choice implemented in 2004. And Beaumont ISD was notable for having high levels of both racial and income segre-

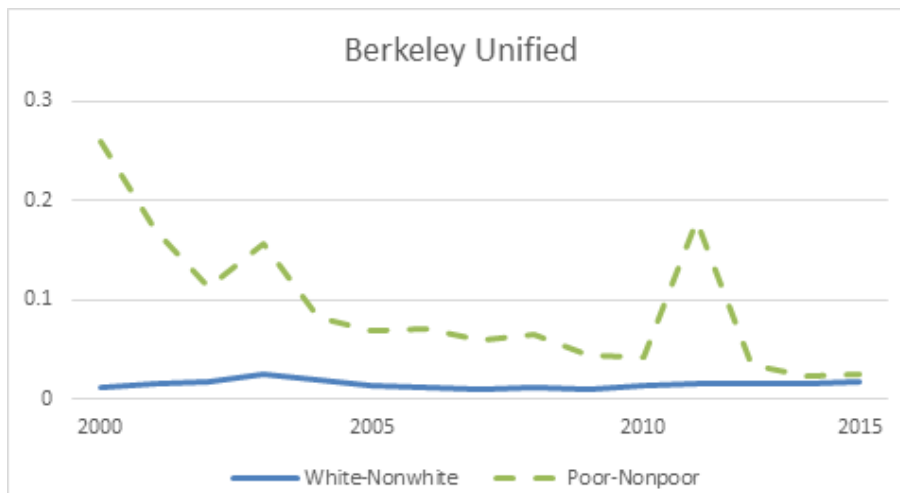
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13. Orfield, G., Ee, J., Frankenberg, E. & Siegel-Hawley, G. (2016). *Brown at 62: School segregation by race, poverty and state*. Los Angeles: Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles.; Owens, A., Reardon, S. F., & Jencks, C. (2016). Income segregation between schools and school districts. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(4), 1159-1197.

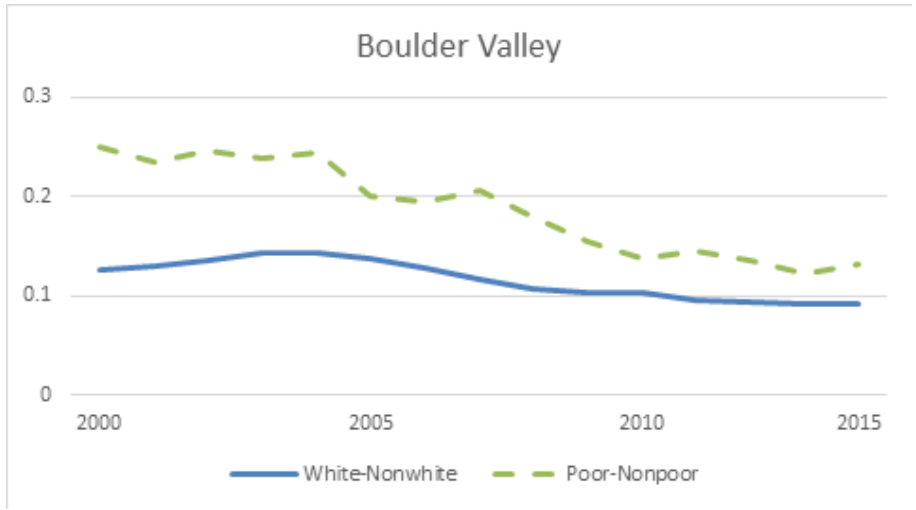
gation despite fluctuations over the period from 2000-2015; it considers socioeconomic diversity only when considering student transfer requests, which may not affect many students. These findings are preliminary as we continue to analyze the relationship between districts' levels of segregation and their approaches to integration.



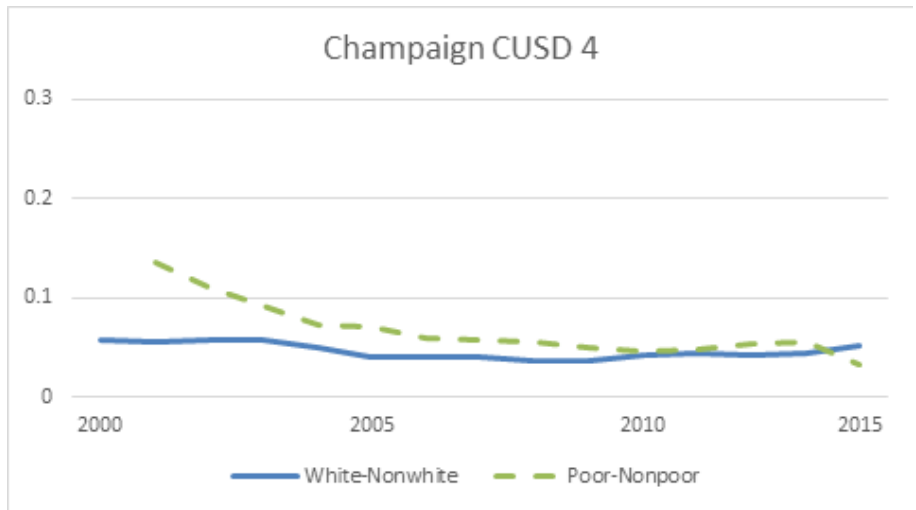
Integration Method: Student Transfer, SES only  
 Last Year Policy Modified: 2015



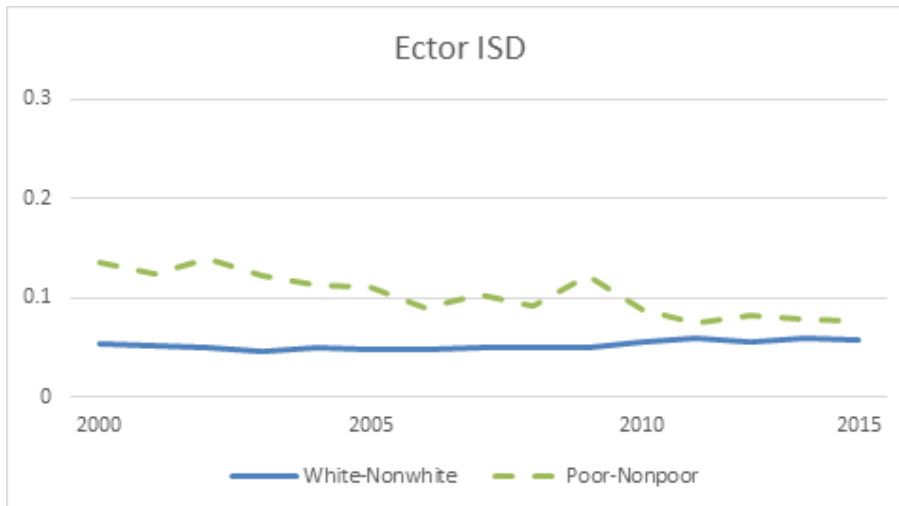
Integration Method: Controlled Choice, Race-Conscious with SES  
 Last Year Policy Modified: 2004



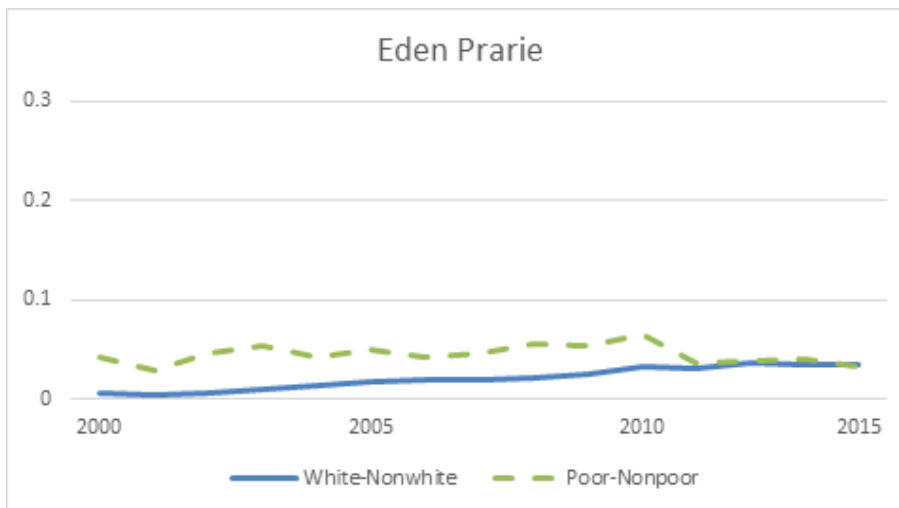
Integration Method: Magnet, SES  
 Last Year Policy Modified: 2016



Integration Method: Controlled Choice, SES  
 Year Policy Implemented: 2014



Integration Method: Multiple Methods, Race-Conscious with SES  
 Last Year Policy Modified: 2011



Integration Method: Attendance Zone Boundaries, SES  
 Last Year Policy Modified: 2011

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## Conclusion

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These preliminary findings show that today dozens of districts implement voluntary integration policies using a range of methods and factors to define diversity (e.g., by race and/or income)—in addition to approximately 200 hundred districts implementing desegregation under court oversight. This research suggests a number of possibilities for districts looking to implement or revise student assignment policies to further diversity. Though preliminary, empirical evidence finds that across all school districts that are implementing voluntary integration plans income segregation has fallen; research will continue to examine whether reductions are more likely depending on the method of integration being used. The trend of declining segregation of FRL students despite the overall U.S. pattern of increasing income segregation of schools is particularly of note given that far more districts in our study relied on socioeconomic indicators to promote diversity than race-conscious indicators. Future research will examine in what contexts voluntary integration policies are associated with declines in racial segregation—particularly whether this is more likely with plans that also incorporate race-conscious factors. We encourage school districts to contact us if interested in resources related to voluntary school integration, or to be included in this study.

## Appendix

Table A-1: Demographic Characteristics of Voluntarily Integrating School Districts, 2014-15

School District	Total Students	FRL Students	Hispanic Students	White Students	Black Students	Asian Students
ALACHUA, FL	27,537	48.8%	8.7%	45.5%	34.4%	5.0%
BEAUMONT ISD, TX	19,229	74.5%	22.4%	12.1%	59.9%	2.9%
BERKELEY UNIFIED, CA	10,325	38.8%	24.5%	36.5%	18.3%	7.9%
BOULDER VALLEY, CO	28,766	20.6%	18.2%	69.7%	0.9%	5.5%
BRYAN ISD, TX	15,603	73.4%	55.0%	24.2%	18.6%	0.4%
BURLINGTON COMMUNITY, IA	4,084	59.4%	5.5%	70.6%	14.8%	0.6%
BURLINGTON, VT	3,970	45.4%	3.6%	65.2%	14.1%	11.5%
BURNSVILLE, MN	8,637	46.6%	15.4%	48.7%	20.5%	8.4%
CAMBRIDGE, MA	5,831	45.9%	13.8%	38.1%	29.1%	11.9%
CHAMPAIGN CUSD 4, IL	9,671	57.9%	9.8%	39.0%	34.2%	9.9%
CHARLOTTE, NC	144,119	59.9%	21.0%	30.0%	40.4%	5.8%
CITY OF CHICAGO, IL	330,081	86.4%	46.4%	10.4%	37.6%	3.9%
CLARK COUNTY, NV	321,366	56.5%	44.8%	27.6%	13.1%	6.4%
DADE, FL	351,613	73.9%	68.7%	7.5%	22.0%	1.1%
DALLAS ISD, TX	159,548	85.9%	70.2%	4.8%	22.8%	1.3%
DAVENPORT, IA	15,317	52.6%	13.9%	56.7%	18.6%	1.8%
DAVIDSON COUNTY, TN	82,204	71.0%	20.8%	30.9%	42.8%	4.0%
DES MOINES, IA	31,976	73.0%	24.7%	43.0%	17.8%	7.5%
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	40,467	99.8%	17.4%	12.8%	65.8%	1.9%
ECTOR COUNTY ISD, TX	31,513	48.1%	73.9%	19.9%	3.8%	0.9%
EDEN PRAIRIE PU, MN	8,921	20.9%	6.5%	63.8%	12.1%	12.4%
EUGENE SD 4J, OR	14,997	41.7%	14.0%	70.2%	1.8%	3.4%
FAIRFAX COUNTY, VA	184,495	27.9%	24.1%	40.8%	10.2%	19.4%
FRANKLIN SSD, TN	3,741	39.5%	24.0%	54.2%	12.6%	4.4%
FRESNO UNIFIED, CA	70,816	84.8%	66.4%	10.9%	8.7%	11.7%
GUILFORD COUNTY, NC	72,234	64.8%	13.7%	34.8%	41.1%	5.9%
HARTFORD SCHOOL, CT	21,103	77.2%	50.2%	12.7%	30.7%	3.3%
HOUSTON ISD, TX	212,192	75.5%	62.1%	8.4%	24.7%	3.6%
IOWA CITY, IA	13,115	33.2%	11.1%	60.7%	17.4%	6.2%
JEFFERSON COUNTY, KY	97,687	59.0%	8.7%	47.5%	36.6%	3.5%
KALAMAZOO, MI	12,086	69.3%	12.1%	37.4%	41.2%	1.5%
LA CROSSE SCHOOL, WI	6,774	48.5%	3.8%	74.1%	4.5%	9.6%
LAFAYETTE PARISH, LA	28,617	61.9%	6.1%	47.7%	42.0%	2.3%

LEE, FL	87,196	66.7%	36.9%	44.1%	14.5%	1.7%
LEE COUNTY, NC	9,933	65.6%	32.9%	41.6%	20.9%	0.8%
MADISON METRO, WI	26,830	47.5%	19.8%	44.1%	17.7%	9.2%
MANATEE, FL	47,052	61.3%	31.8%	49.0%	13.9%	1.8%
MCKINNEY ISD, TX	13,249	33.8%	30.8%	50.6%	12.2%	3.0%
MINNEAPOLIS, MN	33,843	62.7%	19.0%	34.1%	35.0%	6.7%
MONTCLAIR, NJ	6,613	18.7%	11.0%	50.2%	28.9%	5.6%
NAPA VALLEY UNIFIED, CA	17,841	45.4%	53.3%	30.0%	2.6%	9.2%
NEW HAVEN, CT	20,326	58.5%	40.9%	14.4%	41.6%	2.4%
NEW YORK CITY GEOG. 1	10,876	64.5%	41.9%	18.5%	17.2%	19.8%
NEW YORK CITY GEOG. 6	23,514	84.4%	86.7%	4.0%	7.5%	1.2%
NEW YORK CITY GEOG. 13	15,096	68.5%	18.8%	10.3%	63.0%	5.3%
NEW YORK CITY GEOG. 17	22,025	81.6%	15.0%	2.1%	78.5%	2.5%
OMAHA PUBLIC SCHOOLS, NE	51,689	73.1%	33.1%	30.2%	25.6%	4.6%
PALM BEACH, FL	179,483	57.9%	31.6%	33.5%	28.3%	3.0%
PASCO, FL	68,085	56.4%	20.8%	65.2%	6.7%	2.5%
PITTSBURGH, PA	23,919	68.0%	2.5%	33.4%	53.3%	3.6%
POLK, FL	96,938	58.5%	30.6%	43.6%	20.6%	1.6%
PORTLAND, OR	45,171	41.6%	15.8%	56.5%	10.1%	7.8%
POSTVILLE COMMUNITY, IA	656	100.0%	49.1%	40.7%	7.6%	0.2%
RAPIDES PARISH, LA	23,287	70.1%	3.0%	51.3%	43.3%	1.3%
ROCHESTER CITY, NY	29,301	84.9%	26.6%	10.0%	59.3%	3.9%
SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED, CA	53,983	64.1%	27.3%	13.4%	8.8%	41.6%
SAN JOSE UNIFIED, CA	31,854	43.0%	52.3%	25.2%	2.8%	14.9%
SEMINOLE, CA	65,664	47.0%	23.8%	53.4%	14.5%	4.4%
ST. LANDRY PARISH, LA	14,475	76.9%	1.6%	38.8%	58.3%	0.6%
ST. LUCIE, FL	39,511	62.0%	27.8%	36.7%	29.7%	1.7%
STAMFORD, CT	15,725	52.3%	38.9%	32.6%	18.5%	8.8%
TOPEKA, KS	13,718	75.3%	30.1%	39.7%	18.9%	0.7%
TUCSON UNIFIED, AZ	47,450	66.4%	63.1%	21.7%	5.5%	1.6%
WATERLOO COMMUNITY, IA	10,595	69.2%	11.2%	52.4%	25.5%	2.2%
WHITE PLAINS CITY, NY	7,025	39.7%	54.4%	25.0%	14.9%	3.6%
Total	3,541,558	64.8%	38.9%	27.2%	24.7%	5.4%

Source: NCES Common Core of Data, 2014-15