



 COMMENTARY EDUCATION

## A Generation Later, the Federal Government Is Revisiting School Integration

JUNE 01, 2016

On May 16, 2016—exactly sixty-two years after *Brown v. Board*—a federal judge told a Mississippi school district that it was finally time to actually comply with the law. To some, this might seem like an outrageous delay, found in a single antiquated town, a final holdout in the Deep South’s long-gone resistance to school integration.

But segregation is not just a lingering condition in southern states, nor is it isolated in a sprinkling of backwards towns. According to a U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report released last week, the Justice Department currently monitors nearly 180 open school desegregation cases across the country. There are even more nationwide: *New York Times Magazine* education writer Nikole Hannah-Jones estimates that there are roughly 300 school districts with active desegregation orders. And under court order or not, some of the most segregated conditions for black and Hispanic students occur in not in the south, but in states such as New York, Maryland, and Illinois. The resegregation of our public schools is widespread, dangerously normalized, and deeply ingrained.

But for the first time in a generation of students, the federal government seems poised to do something about it.

Through competitive grants and proposed budget allocations, the White House and the Department of Education are taking the steps to ensure that school diversity graduates from a light rhetorical phrase to a genuine priority.

## Stronger Together

In February, the White House announced that the president’s 2017 budget includes a new \$120 million “Stronger Together” grant program to support and encourage locally developed socioeconomic integration programs. The proposal would establish a competitive grant program to reward school districts (or groups of districts) that voluntarily try to break up concentrated poverty in schools. Stronger Together—which would more than double federal funding for integration efforts—reflects the robust commitment to socioeconomic integration from this administration and Department of Education. Secretary of Education John King has repeatedly uplifted both the research and common-sense knowledge that socioeconomic diversity makes children smarter, helps to close the achievement gap, and trains kids to be better citizens and be better to one another.

For those who might argue that Stronger Together is simply an outdated attempt to reestablish “forced” busing, it’s worth noting that the grant is grounded by a belief in locally driven, collaborative efforts for change, developed in concert with community voices rather than in conflict with them. Stronger Together, although subject to legislative approval, is but one of the several ways in which federal leadership has begun to take an increased role in ensuring school integration. In this vein, here are some actions that have been taken:

- **Investing in Innovation (i3) Grants:** The i3 grant program was first established by the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to provide funding to local education agencies (LEAs) or nonprofits partnered with districts or groups of schools to develop and expand innovative and effective educational interventions. This year, for the first time, the call for grants included an absolute priority called “Promoting Diversity,” aimed at programs that reduce racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic isolation in schools and promote school diversity. Organizations that win this competitive grant program could earn up to \$3M to develop programs that meet this criteria.
- **School Improvement Grants:** The Century Foundation has long emphasized the fact that school integration is perhaps the most proven and reliable school improvement strategy, but only recently did the U.S. Department of Education’s School Improvement Grants (SIG) program echo that belief. In a blog published by the Department in March, officials stated:

*Mounting evidence shows that diversity is a clear path to better outcomes in school and in life. Exposure to other students from a wide array of backgrounds can boost empathy, reduce bias and increase group problem-solving skills. In short, it helps prepare students— regardless of their backgrounds—for the world in which they will live and work. Socioeconomically diverse schools are especially powerful for students from low-income families, who historically have not had equal access to the resources they need to succeed.*

The department committed to explore the ways that the SIG program can be used to promote voluntary, community supported efforts to expand socioeconomic diversity in schools and improve student outcomes.

- **Equity Assistance Centers:** Equity Assistance Centers (EACs) are regional training and technical assistance centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education under Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. They provide help to state and local education agencies and the people who work in them, focusing in the areas of race, gender, and national origin equity to public schools. Recently, the department directed the EACs to help districts increase successful plans for socioeconomic desegregation and “address special educational problems occasioned by bringing together students from different social, economic, and racial backgrounds.”
- **Magnet Schools:** The president’s FY 17 Budget also includes \$155 million for magnet schools—an \$18 million increase compared to the previous year. These additional funds would complement Stronger Together through a new provision that allows districts to take into account socioeconomic diversity in the design and implementation of magnet school programs.

Although it’s too soon to see the results of these initiatives, we should be encouraged by their development. Many of these

positive changes have to get through a contentious—and a less-than progressive—Congress. In the meantime, let's remember to continue these conversations on the state and local level, making sure that our transportation systems, housing policies, and school assignment protocols help bring children together rather than keep them apart. Advocates for school diversity should continue to press forward on initiatives that ensure that desegregation efforts don't simply end at the school-building level, but continue into classrooms, honors and gifted programs, disciplinary practices, and inclusive academic pedagogies.

A robust body of research backs up the fact that school diversity and school integration is good for children of all ethnicities, races, and economic backgrounds. It seems as if federal-level leaders, along with strong local leaders in ninety-one school districts and growing, are now hearing what advocates of school integration have been saying for quite some time. Our schools—how equitable, divided, effective, safe, and fair they are—not only reflect our current values as a nation, but also reveal the values that we anticipate passing along to the next generation of Americans. Let's continue this trend.



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