



 REPORT SCHOOL INTEGRATION

Louisville, Kentucky: A Reflection on School Integration

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Throughout the twentieth century, school desegregation has been one of the most divisive issues¹ in the United States. Cities such as Little Rock, Boston, and Detroit saw massive resistance to integration in the form of violence, riots, and boycotts, and many white families chose to leave their home communities in order to avoid the prospects of integration.²

In September of 1975, Louisville, Kentucky, was no exception, as integration was met by students with extreme violence.³ When the district announced a plan that involved busing black urban students to predominantly white suburban schools in Jefferson County and vice versa, white students attacked buses of black students with bricks, started fires, and organized rallies. In addition, at that time, 98 percent of white suburban parents opposed desegregation⁴ and did not hesitate to voice their concerns about educational quality and freedom to Mayor Harvey Sloane as he made walks throughout Louisville and Jefferson County.

Yet despite this extremely negative reaction to desegregation, Louisville's history is unique, in that it is one of the only districts that has maintained a staunch commitment to integration over the last fifty years. Even in 2007, when the Supreme Court declared it was unconstitutional to use race as a factor in student assignment,⁵ the Louisville community remained devoted to integration, creating its own alternative plan⁶ that emphasized both socioeconomic and minority status in order to ensure that all students have equal access to a quality education.

Today, Louisville-Jefferson County is one of the most integrated districts in the nation,⁷ and as of 2011, 89 percent of parents see diversity in schools as desirable.⁸ What explains these shifts in attitude? What about Louisville kept it from reverting back to its previously segregated system? This report analyzes those questions and others, drawing upon a wide variety of sources, including new interviews with former Louisville mayor and Century Foundation board member, Harvey Sloane, who was mayor of Louisville when the district was forced to integrate in the fall of 1975.

Brief History of School Desegregation Efforts

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court passed down a unanimous decision, proclaiming that separate schools were inherently unequal, and district courts must carry out school integrations with "all deliberate speed."⁹ Yet despite this ruling, many cities and states around the nation ignored *Brown v. Board's* implications. It took Louisville-Jefferson County twenty-one years to begin its school integration efforts, and it was by no means the last of districts to integrate.

Today, institutionalized school segregation still persists, as laws have not been enough to rectify the ways in which minorities are disadvantaged through social and political systems. According to a study from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted between the 2000–2001 and 2013–2014 school years, the percentage of racially or socioeconomically isolated schools—with 75 percent or more of their students belonging to one race or socioeconomic

class—increased from 9 percent to 16 percent.¹⁰ What's even more of a cause for concern is that these schools—compared to schools that were not isolated—offered fewer math, science, and college preparatory classes and had more students held back a grade, adding to the already existing achievement gap for poor, African-American, and Latino students.¹¹

The results of this racial isolation and discrimination in schools are striking: only 22 percent of black Americans earn a college degree,¹² as compared to 41 percent of the white population. Compared to white college graduates nationwide, black college graduates are twice as likely¹³ to be unemployed, and studies show that those who have “black sounding names” have to send out twice as many job applications as those with “white sounding names” to receive a call back.¹⁴

This institutionalized, de facto racial segregation is partially rooted in the socioeconomic stratification of schools.¹⁵ As school finance and assignment are traditionally tied to property taxes and neighborhood, student assignment remains dependent upon either the inclusive or discriminatory public policies that help shape the surrounding areas. Much of this has to do with housing policy:¹⁶ For instance, the Federal Housing Administration has long advised against insuring mortgages for homes in multiracial communities, and the National Association of Realtors forbids realtors from bringing in people of a race or nationality who might be detrimental to a neighborhood's property values, which lead racial minorities to remain in low-poverty neighborhoods. In addition, exclusionary zoning practices such as costly building codes and minimum lot size requirements often limit the opportunities for groups of lower-income families and racial minorities to move into wealthy neighborhoods.¹⁷ These examples of institutionalized housing segregation lead racial minorities to live in areas of concentrated poverty with lower quality schools, making it more difficult to achieve social mobility.¹⁸

Although the landscape appears bleak, researchers and advocates still have hope. School integration can be one way to combat institutionalized racism: there has been evidence¹⁹ that integration improves education for both white students and racial minorities; it can reduce the racial student achievement gap²⁰ and allow black students to attend schools with better resources.²¹ And improved educational outcomes are crucial steps to increased political empowerment and expanded economic opportunities for children of color. With these overwhelmingly positive effects in mind, the percentage of people in favor of general integration has increased steadily over time, with 95 percent of the population in favor of blacks and whites attending the same school in 2007.²² Though support is much higher today than it was in the 1950s, people are less likely to support integration when the question is more specific or elaborates on a method of said integration. For instance, in 2007 PEW Hispanic Center survey, 59 percent of respondents said they would rather students attend local schools, even if the students would be predominantly of the same race,²³ and in 1995, 66 percent of whites and 39 percent of blacks²⁴ opposed busing students to achieve racial integration.²⁵

Fortunately, we can derive lessons from history, seeking counsel from leaders and communities that overcame massive resistance and political obstacles to implement robust integration programs. Louisville represents a prime example of a sustainable program implemented under fire. Today, it is one of the most successful and politically popular socioeconomic integration programs in the country. Its accomplishments shed light on—among other things—the ways in which competent, engaged, and courageous leadership can impact change. As a young, bright-eyed mayor, Dr. Harvey Sloane shepherded the court-ordered desegregation plan from chaos to compliance in 1975. His struggles and successes reveal lessons that remain relevant more than forty years later.

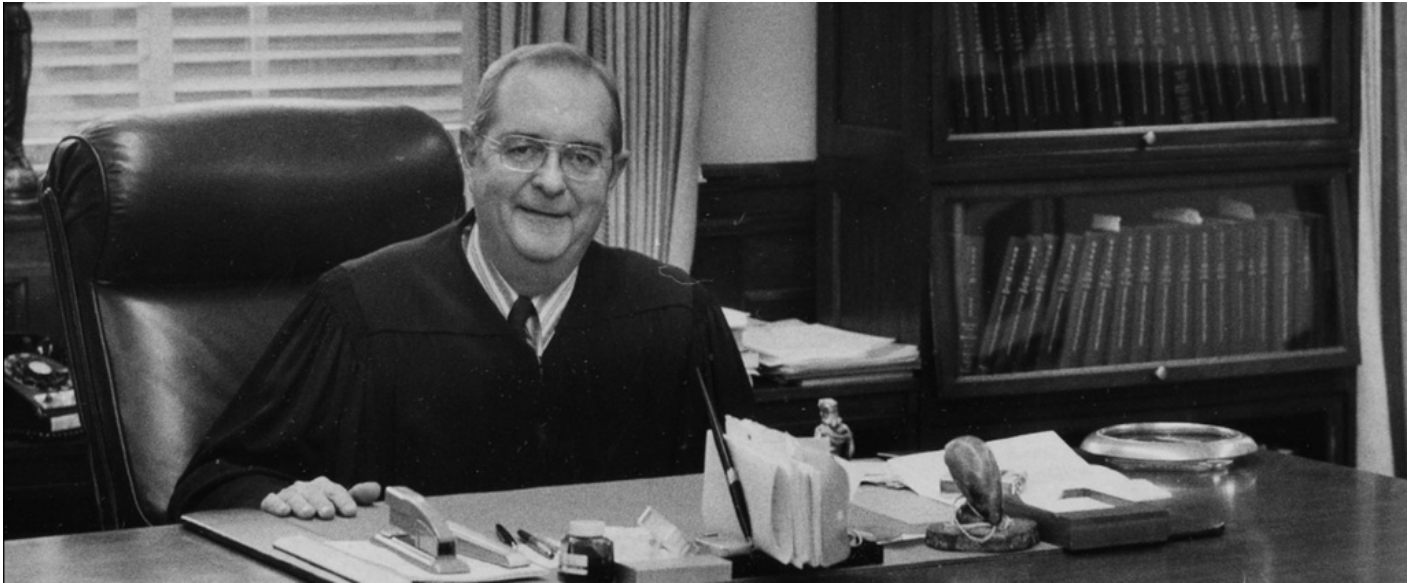
History of Integration in Louisville

The district of Louisville-Jefferson County certainly had a long road ahead of itself at the start of its efforts to desegregate. Though in 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* concluded that “in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place,”²⁶ schools remained segregated in Louisville and other cities across the nation after the court’s decision. With urging from some political leaders and numerous judicial mandates, the federal government intervened and established consequences²⁷ for those school districts that did not comply with integration—the Civil Rights Act of 1964 mandated that schools would lose out on federal funding if its schools did not integrate by 1974.

Likely motivated by the penalties established by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Kentucky Civil Liberties Union, NAACP, and Kentucky Commission on Human Rights began an investigation of Jefferson County Schools in 1971. The group found persistent segregation²⁸ within Jefferson County schools; in particular, the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights reported that more than 90 percent of the students in city schools were black,²⁹ and approximately 95 percent of students in Jefferson County’s suburban district were white.³⁰

These schools were also unequal in terms of educational quality, with more resources funneled into the white suburban schools. One black student, Pamela Smith, remembers what it was like to attend a school in a black neighborhood before integration. She recalled, “We would read about science experiments, what was supposed to happen. But we didn’t actually get to see it because we didn’t have working bunsen burners or chemicals to do experiments with. We had to get the same information without the same resources.”³¹

Ultimately, the Commission’s report agreed in its conclusion that “the Louisville school system has failed—either by design or by lack of effort—to deliver on the promise of full student and faculty desegregation.”³² As a result, these organizations filed a lawsuit requiring the administration to merge the Louisville school systems’ predominantly black urban district with the neighboring suburban district³³ of Jefferson County and desegregate.



U.S. DISTRICT JUDGE JAMES F. GORDON, DECEMBER 28, 1971. SOURCE: *THE COURIER JOURNAL*.

In order to comply with the court's order and achieve racial balance,³⁴ in 1975, District Court Judge James B. Gordon designed and implemented a plan mandating that schools in both Louisville and Jefferson County had to accommodate between 15 and 50 percent black students.³⁵ In order to accomplish this, some black students would be bused³⁶ to white neighborhoods in Southwest Jefferson County, which could take anywhere from sixty to seventy-five minutes,³⁷ and some white students were to be bused³⁸ to black neighborhoods in the West of Louisville. In total, 11,300 black students and 11,300 white students³⁹ were transported on about 250 buses⁴⁰ to 165 different schools,⁴¹ with the intention that white students would only be bused for two years, while black students could be bused for up to ten years.⁴² Some black teachers were also bused to predominantly white schools, as many of them lived in the same communities as their black students.⁴³

Compelling school officials to act with urgency, Judge Gordon's desegregation court order only afforded Sloane and other public officials six weeks to design and implement a functional and effective busing procedure. During those weeks, two previously discreet school systems needed to merge into one, both students and teachers would need to be reassigned, bus routes had to be drawn, public safety officers trained and mobilized, and citizens reassured. Sloane recalls frantic conversations with fellow public officials. A medical doctor by trade, he had little experience designing school assignment plans for the purposes of desegregation or otherwise, and was still in the process of developing rapport with the white community in Louisville and the surrounding suburbs when the ruling came down. He knew that the upcoming months would likely strain that already tenuous relationship. In a recent interview with The Century Foundation, Sloane reflected, "[At the time], all my base had been in the African-American community... I didn't have that linkage into the white community so much. I think to establish stronger contacts with the white community would have been helpful."⁴⁴

Six weeks quickly passed and, on Thursday, September 4, 1975, the school district began to integrate. The first day was extremely tense,⁴⁵ but more peaceful than originally anticipated. Unfortunately, that peace did not last. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that the next day, 10,000 students⁴⁶ “ran out of control at a suburban high school,” where they set fire to buses and threw rocks, injuring almost thirty cops. One black student reflected, “As students we had bricks, rocks, bats, sticks, fists, spit, and profanity hurled at us and our bus drivers as we transitioned from the school to the bus. We were powerless. We struggled to understand the madness, but we knew that busing us across the county was means to end. We were on the heels of the civil rights movement.”⁴⁷

Later that Friday, September 5, the police came into conflict with 2,500 white⁴⁸ rioters, fifty of whom became injured and 250 of whom were arrested. By Saturday, the number of people arrested had surpassed 500,⁴⁹ even when Sloane called 800 Kentucky National Guardsmen to the scene.⁵⁰ Jefferson County Court judge Todd Hollenbach remembers, “[People] rioted, far excessively over what I or anyone anticipated might have happened. I know we were criticized on many fronts for not exerting more force. One of my young troopers lost his eyes, which was just absolutely tragic, but considering that magnitude of these riots it was almost miraculous that that was the only major injury with thousands, scores of thousand of people rioting, looting, burning.”⁵¹

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On Monday, September 8, 1975,⁵² armed guards accompanied students on buses and convoys in order to ensure cooperation and safety, but violence still prevailed. Sloane struggled to confront the violence, and tried to ensure that students remained safe. In the first few days of integration, Sloane rode the bus⁵³ alongside black students, walked through neighborhoods in the city to dialogue with people and monitor violence, and greeted incoming black students at predominantly white schools. In a recent interview, he reflected, “The start of it was just dealing with safety... some of our police officers had buttons on [that said] ‘Stop the busing,’ and I told the police you get those guys out of there. And there were personal threats [to my family]. We had a bullet through the bay window [of our home].”⁵⁴

Shifting Perceptions

In a country that elected its first black president in 2008, many may characterize this sort of violent reaction to integration Sloane described as merely a historical snippet, an antiquated and thoroughly outdated tantrum. While we rarely hear about physical violence being the primary response to current school diversity initiatives, several of the reasons people opposed integration in the 1970s are still present today. At the heart of the controversy remains a concern for high-quality education⁵⁵—and how we both construct and perceive “quality.” Both in the past⁵⁶ and in the present,⁵⁷ white and wealthy parents have been concerned that moving into a “good” neighborhood—which is typically thought of as a high-income, low-minority area with high property value, highly taxed homes—will no longer guarantee the type of high-quality education that is expected in said “good” neighborhood’s public schools. Integration programs signify, among other things, that their kids could be bused to predominantly minority or low-income schools, where students are less likely to have access to counselors, advanced classes, qualified teachers, and state-of-the-art facilities.

At the same time, some black families expressed concern that changing schools would disrupt neighborhood ties and bonds in their communities.⁵⁸ For instance, Edith Nelson Yarbrough—who was a black high school student at the time of integration—remembers receiving her new school assignment in August 1975; she was devastated since her friends were being sent to different schools, and she had gone to school with these kids “all [her] life—from second grade all the way up to junior [year].”⁵⁹ Many black parents also worried that their children would still receive an inferior education.⁶⁰ These concerns are unfortunately borne out of some historical examples of integration programs, in which black teachers and principals were the first to be fired as white students moved into their schools, and school board officials erased the names of schools and facilities that paid homage to black leaders and icons, ignoring the schools’ heritages as beacons in the black community. In Louisville, for example, white parents protested when one school tried to celebrate Dr. King through writing assignments. In addition, many black students who were on track to attend college were not able to do so due to integration and its disruptive nature, as it left them without teacher recommendations and devoted guidance counselors.⁶¹

Although there are often a fair share of negative reactions to new anti-segregation initiatives, leaders and organizers can usually count on the presence of supporters. Even in the 1970s, not everyone in the Louisville community opposed integration. A group of students who graduated high school in the district’s first year of integration have since formed an organization, Pioneers of Desegregation and Forced Busing.⁶² The group’s members felt as though going to an integrated school opened their eyes to how things were outside of their community.⁶³ The organization’s leader, Edith Nelson Yarbrough,⁶⁴ reflected, “As Pioneers, we believe busing in 1975 was important in the lives of citizens within our city and state. This period of time left an indelible footprint on who we are as individuals today. We believe everyone was affected by busing. We hope to see this event embedded in our Kentucky and national curriculum.”



IN THE EARLY DAYS OF DESEGREGATION IN JEFFERSON COUNTY, THESE STUDENTS WERE BUSED BETWEEN JEFFERSONTOWN AND CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL. SOURCE: *THE COURIER-JOURNAL*.

The rewards of integration extend beyond just minority students. While black students certainly benefit from⁶⁵ better class offerings, an expanded curriculum, and additional resources, white students also gain⁶⁶ from integration in a myriad of ways—including the development of critical thinking and increased access to higher education. In time, many of Jefferson County’s white students who had experienced local integration efforts firsthand recognized this, and began to emerge as vocal advocates of the benefits of diverse schools, aligning with research evidence that shows students emerging from diverse school environments continue to embrace and seek out diversity as adults. For instance, alongside black students, white students showed their support in advocacy groups such as Progress in Education,⁶⁷ an organization that created pro-busing literature, planned rallies, and attended congressional hearings on school integration. In addition, over time, white students felt as though going to school with black students altered their outlook on life. One white student, Jessica Goldstein, who was in first grade in 1977 noted, “I think it was very beneficial to go to school and to be friends with and spend your day with people whose economic conditions and life stories are very different from yours. It instilled an attitude of gratitude; it helped build some perspective.”⁶⁸

As months passed, support for integration steadied, so much so that time might be deemed one of the primary factors that led to its ultimate acceptance. Pro-busing groups such as Progress in Education disbanded in 1977,⁶⁹ only two years after integration began in Louisville, due to the city’s general compliance and growing support. In addition, three years after integration began, Judge Gordon stopped monitoring compliance⁷⁰ with the integration order since most people were supportive of the policy. This is likely because at that point, most students had already lived through integration, and research⁷¹ shows that people who experience integration are more in favor of it than others who may judge it based

solely on its reputation.

Louisville Today

As a result of the community's hard work, it is almost no surprise that by the 1990s, Louisville-Jefferson County was the most integrated school district in the nation.⁷² In 2000, the court order to integrate the district formally ended,⁷³ but support for integration was so high that the district created its own plan for student assignment.⁷⁴ Former Jefferson County superintendent Sheldon Berman remarked,⁷⁵ "The desegregation plan actually had a lot of support in the community. It actually created an attitude ... about addressing race in an effective way."

Yet the United States Supreme Court had slightly different ideas for the future of Louisville and other race-conscious school assignment plans. When plaintiff Crystal Meredith moved to Louisville in 2002, she became upset that her son had to ride ten miles to school on a bus because the sought-after local school was full. Alleging that Louisville's student assignment plan infringed on children's fourteenth amendment rights to equal protection under the law, she filed a 2006 lawsuit that eventually combined with a similar challenge to integration plans originating in Seattle, Washington. In the 2007 case⁷⁶ *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, a bitterly divided Supreme Court ruled that the district's goal of preventing racial imbalance did not meet the Court's standard for a constitutionally legitimate use of race, that the program was not narrowly tailored, and that the districts had failed to demonstrate that its objectives could be achieved by using non-racial alternatives. In his now famous tautology, John Roberts wrote, "The way to stop discriminating on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race." It was almost as if all of the work that Louisville had done to integrate had suddenly become meaningless. Sloane recently reflected, "I couldn't believe it. You can't bus [students] for racial purposes. What was this all about in 1975? [What about] the Supreme Court decision in '54?"⁷⁷

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But any assertion that the journey toward integration had ended was far from the truth. In a community where some parents⁷⁸ had grown up in Louisville's integrated environment, students and community members fought hard to maintain some version of integration. As a result, the district developed a new plan that based integration on more than

just race. In its revised form, the district placed schools in geographic clusters⁷⁹ or groups of diverse neighborhoods based on⁸⁰ census block characteristics including percentage minority residents, household income, and adult education level. Parents would be able to list preferences for specific schools in their cluster in an application, and the district would account for both family school choice and diversity goals. While there is no guarantee that a student would be assigned their first choice school, most families seem satisfied with a process that gave them greater variety and control over their child's educational future.⁸¹

Certainly, the city has faced challenges establishing and maintaining socioeconomic school integration. Not everyone is pleased. The state of Kentucky twice—in 2011 and 2012—attempted to pass legislation that would have ended school busing programs, and some local parents have continued to voice concerns about the length of their child's bus ride or the lack of guarantee that the district will honor their first-choice school selection.⁸² As a result, many wealthier parents have chosen to pull their children from Jefferson County Public Schools altogether. In part due to this parental decision-making, the Archdiocese of Louisville sports the third-highest percentage of enrolled Catholic school students in the United States: 7.3 percent in Louisville compared to 2.3 percent nationally.⁸³

But generally, citizens of Louisville-Jefferson County defend and celebrate the progress that they have made. According a 2011 report from The Civil Rights Project, over 90 percent of Jefferson County parents think that diverse schools have important educational benefits for children, and a substantial portion think that the decades of school integration have improved the greater Louisville area.⁸⁴ A 2011 survey also revealed that students of all races that attended integrated schools felt as if they were better able to understand and work with children from different backgrounds, and looked forward to attending integrated colleges and universities.⁸⁵ In addition, one 2011 survey of Jefferson County parents found that 89 percent⁸⁶ of them wanted their children to learn in a diverse environment, and 87 percent were satisfied⁸⁷ with the quality of their children's education. These numbers are starkly different than those in the 1970s, where nearly 98 percent⁸⁸ of suburban residents were against integration.

The results of Louisville's integration efforts are astounding. The average demographic for schools in the county is 49 percent white, 37 percent black, and 14 percent Latino and other ethnic and racial groups.⁸⁹ Furthermore, among the largest twenty-five schools in the county, only one had more than 70 percent of the student body from a single race.⁹⁰ As demonstrated in TCF's recent report on the benefits of school integration,⁹¹ integrated schools such as Jefferson County schools also "prepare students for life, work, and leadership in a more global economy by fostering leaders who are creative, collaborative, and able to navigate deftly in dynamic, multicultural environments." This is important, given that employers are overwhelmingly seeking those who can work with a diverse group of people.⁹²

Integration also has a positive impact on student achievement levels for both white students and racial minorities. While there is no data that directly compares the achievement levels of Louisville students before and after integration, there is a large body of evidence suggesting racial achievement gaps shrink after integration. According to one study, the racial gap in SAT scores can be reduced by almost a quarter once integration is implemented. According to another study, the achievement gaps between black/white and Latino/white students in Hartford, Connecticut were eliminated by third grade due to the creation of racially diverse magnet schools. In addition, we see similar results in Louisville, though these results are tied more to educational opportunity.⁹³ A recent study questioned students about educational aspirations and access to college, and found that students' answers were remarkably similar across race, suggesting that integration leads to equal educational opportunities. Likewise, between 90 percent of black students and 93 percent of white students reported being encouraged to attend college.⁹⁴

Integration efforts do not just have implications on diversity, achievement, and educational opportunity. For example, compared to the segregated city of Detroit,⁹⁵ which had roughly the same percentage of black and low-income families as Louisville did back in 1975, the integrated city of Louisville is doing much better in terms of economics and crime today. Researchers, including Stephen Billings of UNC-Charlotte, find that school segregation contributes to higher crime rates, as kids that attend struggling schools together in struggling neighborhoods are more likely to engage in criminal activity side by side as they age.⁹⁶

In Louisville, housing segregation declined more than 20 percent since 1990, likely contributing to the city's relative escape of Detroit's struggles. School integration and housing plans can work together to reduce the dependence on busing for equal education. Louisville leaders offered three exemptions to the busing program: one to already diverse neighborhoods that met the racial balance goals established in the original court order, another to black families who made an integrative move into a predominantly white neighborhood using housing vouchers, and another to neighborhoods that eventually evolved into integrated environments. Although an imperfect plan, failing to prioritize socioeconomic status and overlooking public housing site selection in segregated neighborhoods, Louisville's exemption policy produced an incentive for neighborhoods to become more diverse.⁹⁷ Eventually, this provision ended, but not before the entire program of city-suburban comprehensive desegregation had limited the amount of concentrated poverty in the region and reduced white-flight from the city, stabilizing home values and tax revenues. Parents in Louisville can feel confident that the location of their home will not negatively impact either the resources or the racial composition of their child's potential school.

Lessons from Louisville

In many ways, Louisville, Kentucky, presents an important case study, revealing lessons that span beyond mere structural design of an integration plan into more amorphous goals—ensuring adaptability of school integration plans under legal and political fire, centering equity and inclusion in school assignment processes, and nursing a community spirit that values diversity but is still comprised of individuals that remain rationally self-interested.

At least a portion of the school system's success is rooted in Louisville and Jefferson County's commitment to implement its integration program county-wide and across the region. To maximize the access to and effectiveness of desegregation plans, bigger is better; that is to say, plans that reach every corner of a region not only involve a more economically diverse group of children, but also minimize the likelihood that wealthy parents can avoid desegregation by simply switching neighborhoods.⁹⁸ While Jefferson County Public Schools accomplished this by consolidating city and county districts, multiple districts have recognized that interdistrict programs can be powerful tools for equity even when a merger is not politically plausible. We discuss the importance of these programs later in this section.



DEMONSTRATORS WAVED SIGNS ALONG FAIRDALE ROAD AS ONE BUS TO FAIRDALE HIGH SCHOOL NEARED ITS DESTINATION. SOURCE: *THE COURIER-JOURNAL*.

Although the Louisville-Jefferson County story seems unique, it should not have been. By most measures, Detroit and Louisville found themselves in similar situations at the start of the 1970s. In 1972, when Detroit faced a court order very similar to Louisville's, the racial populations of both cities were equally segregated, sitting at around 80 percent white and 20 percent black.⁹⁹ Today, the city of Detroit is in economic straits, experiencing elevated crime rates, high building and housing vacancy rates, and a declining tax base. Right outside of its borders, the suburbs are some of the wealthiest,

and whitest, areas in all of Michigan.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, after decades of success, schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg rapidly resegregated after a judge declared unitary status for the district and district leaders implemented a new student assignment plan that combined neighborhood school assignments and loosely regulated school choice.¹⁰¹ And schools in the Richmond, Virginia metro area remain seriously racially and economically isolated, stratified along county-city lines.

Why is it that Louisville has seen so much more success compared to its counterparts? What historical facts, and perhaps most importantly, current policies, have helped secure the region's role as a leader in sustainable and adaptable school integration plans? Moreover, what can districts that are considering designing integration programs learn from those who have come out on the other side?

The historical struggles of Jefferson County Public Schools we have laid out, analyzed in congruence with its current structures, can provide insights to these questions.

Timing: The Virtues of Planning and Patience

The lessons that Louisville teaches us about timing exist in two parts: the first component concerns strategy, and the second urges patience. When the court order first came down in 1974, Judge Gordon only afforded the newly merged districts six weeks to compose a plan to integrate their schools. Mayor Harvey Sloane recalls the frantic response to that directive.

“It’s just ridiculous to do this in six weeks. You’ve got a whole new system. You’ve got to merge the city and county. Teachers have to be assigned. Teachers are somewhat concerned because they don’t know what they’re getting into. You had... information problems, getting to the community in a way that they could accept this and not just have this... come down.”¹⁰²

The head of the Louisville Crime Commission and later Director of Safety for the city Ernie Allen agreed with Sloane upon reflection that the timeline was too tight. “Two years to prepare for implementation would have been challenging,” he wrote in a recent email to Sloane. “The time we had was ridiculous.”

Unfortunately, research about the appropriate length of time for planning and implementation of integration programs remains limited. We do know, however, that successful programs require deep research, political will (or in the absence of that will, legal mandates), careful budgeting and logistical arrangements, and technical support resources. For example, Hartford, Connecticut, well-known for its regional magnet programs, wages a robust marketing campaign that includes both corporate caliber and door-to-door techniques in order to reduce racial and economic isolation in these schools. In 2015, the state funded the city's marketing contract up to \$350,000, which leaders used to reach out to predominantly

wealthy, white, and suburban parents via radio, social media, and television ads, information fairs, and Spanish-language advertising for Hartford residents.¹⁰³ School officials then had to determine bus routes that could ensure timely and safe transportation across districts for kids of all backgrounds, draw up interdistrict contracts, and determine the types of schools (STEM, Arts, Montessori, etc.) that would be sufficiently magnetic to appeal to a demographic cross-section of kids and their families. Presumably, this process should demand more than six weeks' worth of work.

Realistically, however, the temporal sweet spot likely rests above the six week timeline suffered by Dr. Sloane but below his suggested alternative two-year timeframe. While space and time to carefully plan are facially appealing, unnecessarily long periods of planning time might not only be used as stalling mechanisms by less-than-enthusiastic leadership, but also provide time for anti-integration voices to amplify and organize. In Memphis, Tennessee—the poorest large metropolitan area in the United States—a long-discussed merger between city schools and the wealthier, higher performing Shelby County school system intended to protect funding for city schools and function as a regional desegregation program. Yet almost immediately, families in the surrounding suburban towns talked of establishing their own separate school systems or pulling their children out of the public schools entirely. One year after the announcement of the merger, but still prior to implementation, these skeptics made good on their word: five of the six surrounding Shelby County suburbs commissioned and received reports exploring the creation of independent districts, the state legislature passed a law that would allow these districts to do so, parents preemptively removed their children from public schools, and pro-status-quo voices combined into a loud and intimidating force that capitalized on suburban fears of depressed test scores and increased problems for their children.¹⁰⁴ The time between the initial announcement and the implementation proved a breeding ground for obstruction and misinformation, and in the absence of strong, cross-racial and cross-class campaigns emphasizing the necessity of diversity and equity, the Memphis merger did not last.

Louisville, in isolation, does not offer a model of an ideal timeline for program design and execution. But, as importantly, its story does offer insight into how powerful the experiences of desegregation in schools can become in shaping positive sentiments toward diversity. Studies demonstrate that attitudes about school integration programs largely correlate to whether or not someone has participated in a program themselves, as either a student or as a parent.¹⁰⁵ Surveys, by well-respected pollsters such as Gallup, conducted during peak periods of school desegregation efforts showed dismal numbers of white residents embracing busing efforts, but few of these surveys focused on those most affected by such plans. One national survey, conducted three times on parent samples between 1978 and 1989, found increasing satisfaction across time among both white and black parents whose children were bused in integration plans. Right around the peak of black-white desegregation in 1989, 64 percent of whites, 63 percent of blacks, and 70 percent of Asians bused for desegregation said that the experience was “very satisfactory.” Their parents agreed, offering very positive responses to desegregation plans—far more positive than their responses to many other education issues.¹⁰⁶

Contrary to popular belief, parents and children on the front lines of desegregation are much more positive about the experience and its importance than the public as a whole; in large part, opposition to integration was not based in experience, but in fear.

In Louisville, the process of acceptance—and later embrace—of integration proved to be remarkably short. Initially, white opposition to the plan was massive, with over nine-tenths of the population opposed.¹⁰⁷ But by 1978, when active court supervision of the integration plan ended, residents elected to continue a similar version of the school assignment plan. Already, families affected by the program were beginning to appreciate the benefits of diversity. This appreciation was bolstered by an intentional effort on the part of Harvey Sloane and other public officials to ensure that rumors and misinformation surrounding integration were quickly squashed and corrected by open and consistent lines of communication between the media and education officials. Acknowledging the fear that gripped much of the white community in the 1970s, Sloane took a trip up to Boston, MA the summer before the court order went into effect. Sloane felt that Boston, having just undergone a high-profile, tumultuous battle over desegregating their public schools, could provide insight on how to prepare for Louisville's upcoming events. As a result, Sloane ensured that reporting about issues pertaining to school integration would be verified by the school board and other relevant public officials. It was not necessarily about creating a positive narrative around integration, Sloane acknowledged, but about making sure that negative feelings would not be fertilized by false information.¹⁰⁸

Quelling the spread of misinformation and presenting facts about the benefits of integration are essential to develop public acceptance. So too is adequately engaging the community in the conversation about integration. Sloane wishes that he would have done this more. As a relatively young medical doctor moving to Louisville, Sloane opened a successful practice on the West side of the city in a predominantly black neighborhood. Over time, he began to develop relationships and a comfortable rapport with the African-American community, and black residents largely supported his run for office. Although white himself, he did not have the same level of familiarity with the city's white residents, nor with the predominantly white residents of wider Jefferson County. He hypothesizes that much of the early violence could have been prevented by meaningful dialogue—listening sessions, or a more iterative process of creating a desegregation plan. The opposition might have been rooted in racism for some, fear and misinformation for others, but many residents most strongly objected to the idea of a plan being suddenly imposed on them in a way that they felt was rushed and undemocratic.

Community engagement remains an important step in constructing a contemporary program. Not only will it offer insights into the pedagogical wants and needs of the community served by new assignment protocols, but it also provides skeptics and supporters opportunities to interact, learn from one another, and dispel rumors and stereotypes. Current voluntary integration programs work best when residents feel as if the plan is owned by the community that

houses it, where parents are less likely to opt out of the public education system because they too had a voice in constructing that system. It also gives families from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds an opportunity to dialogue with one another before their children begin attending school together, while engaging with and holding accountable school district and regional leadership.

Ensuring School Quality

“People got to thinking, let’s work on what kids actually receive when they get to school as opposed to how they get to school,” Harvey Sloane said of Louisville in the years after the desegregation busing began. Jefferson County Public Schools’ continued commitment to securing high performance from each school in its clusters certainly contributed to the high levels of parent satisfaction and sustainability of its desegregation principles.

Researchers broadly agree that school desegregation is an effective route to improving school quality. The statistics bear out this fact. Nationally, middle income schools are twenty-two times more likely to be persistently high performing than high-poverty schools.¹⁰⁹ According to a 2016 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, students who attend racially and socioeconomically isolated schools were offered fewer math, science, and college preparatory classes than their peers in middle-income schools, were less likely to have access to a school counselor, and were far more likely to experience exclusionary disciplinary action.¹¹⁰ Teacher’s College Columbia professor Amy Stuart Wells points out that students in integrated schools receive a battery of civic, socio-emotional, and academic benefits, including better performance on standardized tests, higher likelihood of enrolling in college, improved critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity, and better preparation to thrive in multicultural environments.¹¹¹ And James Ryan, dean of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, points out that ensuring that kids from different backgrounds attend school together combats the long-standing wrong of stockpiling the best resources and opportunities for the most privileged students.¹¹² This explains why low-income children, given the chance to attend more affluent schools, tested two years ahead of their peers in high-poverty schools on the fourth grade mathematics National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test.

Researchers in Montgomery County, Maryland, discovered that low-income students whose families were randomly given vouchers for neighborhoods with low-poverty schools significantly outperformed their peers who remained in high poverty neighborhoods and schools, even though the high-poverty schools spent around \$2000 more per pupil on highly effective programs and initiatives.¹¹³

Diverse schools are better schools. But it is worth acknowledging that not all diverse schools are great.

Diverse schools are better schools. But it is worth acknowledging that not all diverse schools are great. Integration efforts work best and last the longest when schools across the region are all of high quality. This is a particularly critical factor in much preferred two-way integration plans, where both high and low-income families send their students across traditional school boundaries. The Montgomery County study is particularly compelling because, while its primary finding emphasizes the importance of socioeconomic integration in student achievement outcomes, it also finds that the students improved with increased funding and resources, as well. That is to say, the interventions allowed by the better funding in the study's lower-income schools—including full-day kindergarten, reduced class sizes in kindergarten–grade 2, extended class times, customized support for special needs children, and professional development for teachers—also made a positive difference in learning outcomes.¹¹⁴

Moreover, emerging evidence demonstrates that coordinated supports targeting academic and non-academic barriers to achievement, such as homelessness, hunger, trauma, or poor healthcare access, are necessary and effective. Some educational policy experts refer to these as wraparound services. A recent study by Henry Levin, an economist at Columbia University, found that well-designed comprehensive support services can be cost effective and yield a return on investment.¹¹⁵ A study of nearly 8,000 students in a large urban district who received this type of support from an organization named City Connects during elementary school closed two-thirds of the achievement gap in mathematics and half of the gap in English, and cut the high school dropout rate in half.¹¹⁶

Before, during, and after the process of school desegregation, regions must ensure that all of its schools are properly funded, resourced, and supported. The combination of diversity-promoting student assignment protocol and in-school best practices for academic success yields an environment where students are most likely to grow together, wherever they are planted.

Rethinking Diversity in the Twenty-first Century

In the consolidated case, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 13* and *Meredith v. Jefferson County* (henceforth, *Parents Involved*), the Supreme Court prevented school districts from considering individual race of a child when determining where that child will attend school. A party in the case, Jefferson County

Public Schools (JCPS) now faced a dilemma. Should the district abandon its long-standing race-based desegregation plan? And if not, how might it secure the diversity of its schools while abiding by the new legal limitations?

In the months following the ruling, the district considered three main options: adopt a system-wide magnet school plan that would transform every school into a magnet, retreat into uncontrolled choice, or modify the former controlled choice plan. Recognizing that the magnet plan was cost prohibitive and that uncontrolled choice would likely lead to a resegregation of their schools, Louisville opted to work with a team of experts to revise their current plan with an eye to socioeconomic factors. This new plan uses neighborhood-level demographics and requires that each school in the district serve a combination of students from high and low-opportunity neighborhoods.

This time, the definition of “opportunity” is more inclusive of factors other than race, and takes into account that racial diversity is no longer just a black and white story.

This time, the definition of “opportunity” is more inclusive of factors other than race, and takes into account that racial diversity is no longer just a black and white story. The criteria for identifying student background considers income level, parental educational attainment, and all racial categories. JCPS looks at the geographic areas that fit these demographic profiles, and labels them as either Area A (below average income and adult education level, and above average racial minority population) or Area B (the converse). Students and families then have the chance to rank the schools that they would like to attend, and county officials try to honor those choices while seeking to keep Area A students between 15 and 50 percent of the student body.

National trends amplify the importance of this reevaluation. The share of both Latino and Asian students in public schools continues to grow, with Latino students now outnumbering whites in the west and blacks in the south.¹¹⁷ Simultaneously, the share of students qualifying for the free and reduced price lunch program—an imperfect but popular indicator of poverty—has grown rapidly, with over half of U.S. children qualifying for the program in 2013.¹¹⁸

Districts embarking on voluntary desegregation need nuanced measures of diversity and privilege. First, school officials should be conscious of socioeconomic status in addition to race, and not only for legal reasons. The 1966 Coleman Report (and subsequent studies) found that the single greatest predictor of a student’s academic achievement is the socioeconomic composition of the school that they attend.¹¹⁹ While racial diversity provides benefits to all students that are both unique from and analogous to class, UCLA professor Gary Orfield points out that “educational research suggests that the basic damage inflicted by segregated schools comes not from racial concentration but the concentration

of children from poor families.”¹²⁰ Louisville learned this lesson years ago, when their race-based integration plan yielded one school that, while beautifully integrated by race, remained almost entirely low-income. That school struggled immensely.¹²¹

Secondly, school officials should consider alternatives to the federal school lunch program data as measures of student and neighborhood disadvantage. While free and reduced price lunch eligibility is a popular socioeconomic marker, it is a blunt and imperfect measure, based solely on self-reported family income. Researchers have found that eligibility for high school students might be underreported due to fear of being stigmatized as poor by their peers; another study found that about 15 percent of school lunch applicants received benefits beyond their eligibility, while nearly 8 percent did not receive full benefits.¹²² And as more and more schools use the “Community Eligibility Provision” for providing free meals to all children within the school, fewer families will have to fill out forms for the federal lunch program, limiting how researchers and student assignment professionals can use that data.¹²³

Jefferson County serves as one example of a school district that successfully uses more sophisticated measures. In a February 2016 report by The Century Foundation, researchers revealed that voluntarily desegregated districts around the country use a wide range of effective measures, including but not limited to neighborhood factors like percentage of owner-occupied homes, percentage of single-parent homes, and percentage of households that primarily speak a language besides English. Others looked at student eligibility for public assistance programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), public housing, foster care, and homeless or migrant programs.¹²⁴

Finally, school officials must continue to think critically about the complex and changing relationship between class, race, and place. In a nation of changing demographics, what will we consider an integrated school? If a school is multilingual, overwhelmingly black and Latino, and high-poverty, does the racial and linguistic diversity of that space render it desegregated? Likely, the answer is no. Desegregation is about shifting and restructuring concentrations of power that too often correlate with wealth and white skin, not solely about bringing together children who look different from one another. Many of the demographic measures mentioned in the previous paragraph can act as viable tools to examine how race, class, and geography can intersect to paint an approximate portrait of a child’s level of marginalization.

Interdistrict Solutions and Safe, Reliable Transportation

More than forty years ago, the Supreme Court voted 5–4 to invalidate a Detroit plan requiring that white and black students cross district boundary lines for the purposes of desegregation. The case, *Milliken v. Bradley*, slowed down efforts to create robust and voluntary interdistrict desegregation plans. Arguably, the legal principle articulated in the case—that the scope of the remedy must match the scope of the violation—could have justified Detroit maintaining its cross-district assignment plan. James Ryan, calling the ruling “a particularly cramped view of state responsibility,” points out that *Milliken* “ignored the various steps government officials had taken to keep neighborhoods segregated.”¹²⁵

But several districts, including Louisville, actively acknowledged the importance of interdistrict programs and regional solutions, and found ways to work within the confines of the controlling law. In the years after *Milliken*, successful federal cases leading to metropolitan desegregation remedies were also mounted in St. Louis, Missouri, Wilmington, Delaware, and Indianapolis, IN.¹²⁶ Unfortunately, such districts are the minority. Today, while school and neighborhood segregation stubbornly persists within school districts lines, the majority of economic segregation exists between districts. Some experts estimate that between 60 and 70 percent of school segregation can be attributed to how students are sorted across district boundary lines.¹²⁷ Both within- and between-district segregation have been fostered by intentionally discriminatory practices in the public and private sectors; they persist due to tepid legal and legislative responses to those past wrongs.

For decades, the Federal Housing Authority promoted residential segregation by refusing to subsidize mortgages in racially mixed neighborhoods, while private banks followed suit.¹²⁸ Meanwhile, public housing has been concentrated in racially segregated city neighborhoods, and local suburban governments have deployed exclusionary zoning laws that effectively shut out poor families from most suburban, affluent areas. These practices, in combination with realtor bias and racially restrictive covenants that lasted long past their legal permissibility, have essentially steered white families into the suburbs while limiting the options of minorities.¹²⁹ In most major American metropolitan areas, interdistrict school assignment plans are necessary in order to untangle the ugly legacies of housing discrimination and school segregation.¹³⁰

It is important to distinguish between open enrollment policies and interdistrict plans, which differ in the intent of their design, in their structure, and in their outcomes. Open enrollment choice policies, now on the books in nearly every state, allow for students to transfer into or out of districts, but their central goal is to provide a market-like incentive for school districts to compete for students. Thus, open enrollment policies typically have no controls to secure that schools see a diverse group of students, and they rarely provide transportation for students that choose to attend a school outside of their zones or districts. In this way, open enrollment policies usually aggravate racial and social class stratification rather than ameliorate it.

In contrast, interdistrict desegregation plans mandate, incentivize, or strongly encourage suburban involvement, build in technical or administrative support to aid in diverse student recruitment and assignment, and in many cases, incorporate magnet programs to attract increased participation. Another common and critical component of these plans is that they offer free transportation to program participants. Integration without transportation is a safe without a key—potential without the mechanism to unlock it. Federally, student transfer provisions in the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) include funding for transportation, putting integration options in reach for low-income and working families.

Taking the Next Steps for Equity

School desegregation is a critical educational innovation, and sets the nation's children up to create and succeed in a vibrant, multicultural, and highly-connected world. But these goals remain distant if housing, transportation, and economic policy fail to accompany educational policy, and if mechanisms such as tracking and exclusionary discipline practices reign within school walls.

The truth is, of course, that the causes of segregation are well documented and include centuries of discriminatory legislation and deliberate policy choices.

In the majority opinion in *Milliken*, Justice Potter Stewart dismissed history when he claimed that segregation was caused by “unknown, perhaps unknowable, factors.”¹³¹ The truth is, of course, that the causes of segregation are well documented and include centuries of discriminatory legislation and deliberate policy choices. These policies reached far beyond schools, and rear their head in longstanding contemporary practices such as widespread exclusionary zoning, the placement of public transportation and highways, the steering of families of color into risky loan products, and the dearth of tax benefits that uplift our poorest children and their families.¹³²

School officials who wish to maximize the effects of desegregation should coordinate with their counterparts who work on surrounding areas in the social safety net. Coordinated policies between public officials in different spheres need to invest in both places and the people within them, operating across sectors and on many levels. A panel of experts at a Harvard conference, including Robert D. Putnam, recommended a set of interventions including:

1. preserving and developing affordable housing in high-demand real-estate markets through inclusionary zoning

and community land grants;¹³³

2. providing opportunities for long-term mobility to higher-income areas by employing Moving-to-Opportunity like initiatives and constructing affordable housing in higher-income neighborhoods;¹³⁴ and,
3. weakening the consequences of neighborhood poverty by softening or eliminating school boundary lines and reviving or expanding Jobs-Plus programs.¹³⁵

Communities also have to challenge themselves to imagine true integration, rather than to remain satisfied with desegregation. While certainly a precondition for the latter, racially and economically mixed schoolhouses do not automatically equate to equitable educational experiences. A recent study found that approximately 37 percent of the achievement gap between rich and poor students is explained by curricular differences due to academic tracking.¹³⁶ Karolyn Tyson's book, *Integration Interrupted*, forcefully argued that even in desegregated districts, segregation clings to life through racialized tracking, often used after *Brown v. Board* to insulate white students from the black peers down the hallway. Nationally, minority and low-income students remain underrepresented in advanced and college-prep classes, and are less likely to enroll in gifted programs.¹³⁷ At the same time, beginning in preschool, black children are 3.6 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than are white preschoolers. In kindergarten through twelfth grade, that disparity widens even further, often times in response to subjective behaviors falling under the loosely defined category of "defiance"—slow or non-compliance with teacher or school directives.¹³⁸

Complacency around these issues engenders a system of education that is more subtle than outright segregation but equally separate—not to mention one that is psychologically and academically dangerous for already marginalized student populations. The school building should not be a microcosm of a still divided America. Instead, it ought to transcend troublesome patterns of inequity by, first, acknowledging the roles that race and class play in the classroom experience, and second, identifying and applying the best practices to ensure that those students are welcomed, valued, challenged, and respected.

Louisville still has room to grow in this area, but the durability and popularity of its regional student assignment program provides evidence that voluntary integration can be both plausible and successful. Jefferson County Public Schools presents us with a complicated story, punctuated by lawsuits, protest, modification and challenges. But its narrative is as important as it is complex. The court-ordered desegregation plan's evolution from a heavily resisted mandate to a widely regarded and nuanced choice reveals that the combination of persistence and strong policy can feed true systemic progress. Its adoption of stronger socioeconomic measures, as well as its regional approach to desegregation, careful timing, and continued emphasis on school quality represent critical lessons that could be adopted

by other regions and school districts willing to put in the work. Although there is little that has been “easy” in this decades-long story, school leaders should be encouraged by the possible. As our nation begins to move beyond mere desegregation, towards true integration of schools and students—equitable classroom opportunities combined with consistent and meaningful interactions across both race and class—the lessons gleaned from Louisville-Jefferson County will hopefully serve as examples of good first steps.

COVER PHOTO: AT GREENWOOD ELEMENTARY, MARK STEWART, 8, SEATED, EXCHANGED INTRODUCTIONS WITH A NEW CLASSMATE, DARREL HUGHES, ALSO 8. PHOTO BY MICHAEL COERS, SEPTEMBER 3, 1975, PUBLISHED IN THE LOUISVILLE TIMES ON SEPTEMBER 4, 1975. SOURCE: THE COURIER-JOURNAL.

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