

TRANSCRIPTION

Center Announcer: Welcome to the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center Equity Spotlight Podcast. This podcast series will feature the Center's Equity Fellows, national scholars from North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio who are working to advance equitable practices within school systems. Each episode will focus on a topic relevant to ensuring equitable access and participation, and quality education for historically marginalized students, specifically in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion, and at the intersection of socioeconomic status.

Courtney M.: The podcast today is a follow up from our previous podcast episode on the *Implications of Desegregation and School Choice*. If you haven't had an opportunity, we recommend that you check out that episode as well as *Understanding Racial Opportunity Costs for High Achieving Students of Color*. To explore our topic of today, which is focused on the landscape of school choice, I want to first introduce our guest panelists. Today, we have Chris Thelen, Alounso Gilzene, and Dr. Venzant Chambers, who are all actively working and engaged in research in this area of school choice. To begin, could you all share how you came to the work of school choice?

Terah V. C.: Sure. I mean, you know, I have the work that I've been doing on racial opportunity cost, or the cost of school success for high achieving students of Color, but even that work is sort of an outgrowth of a larger interest that I have in post-*Brown* ed policy and kind of looking at the contemporary effects of desegregation. Until moving back to Michigan several years ago, it gave me the opportunity to kind of return to these roots around desegregation because Michigan has an interesting history in the whole desegregation landscape. And we'll talk about that today. But this team, Alounso, Chris, myself, and then also, Dr. John Yun got together to kind of look at some of the implications of contemporary school choice, given these

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larger desegregation trends. And so that is what led us to the work that we're doing now.

Chris T.: I study educational policy, and I'm specifically interested in ed policy in urban environments, parental engagement policy and school choice policy. So working on this project with Dr. Chambers and the rest of the team has been a really great opportunity for me to look at the intersections between parental engagement policy and school choice.

Alounso G.: I also study urban environments and how Black students are educated in these sort of environments. So when I first got here, choice really wasn't a part of my own research agenda. However, it got added as I was working with Dr. Chambers and Chris and Dr. Yun. And I did have some experience in the state of Pennsylvania working with a charter school there. So it was really interesting to see how choice policies were shaped there in comparison to choice policies here in Michigan. And being able to do this work here has allowed me to educate myself about these sort of issues, and talk meaningfully about the way that policy works here in the state of Michigan.

Courtney M.: So could you all share what is the landscape of school choice in Michigan?

Chris T.: So, school choice policy in Michigan really started coming to the fore in the early 1990s under Governor Engler's administration and the conservative lawmakers who were in power at the time. That came along with several other market-based, free choice type lot initiatives and the most prominent forms of school choice in Michigan are charter schools which get a lot of attention, but also inner district school choice, which is where students from one district can transfer to another district within the same intermediate

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school district or a contiguous one. And a really important part of this policy is if a district agrees to receive a transfer student, the per pupil funding allotment from the state transfers with the student when they go to the new school. So there are some really important financial implications that come along with that. And currently about 90% of school districts in Michigan choose to participate in policy.

Terah V. C.:

I think it's interesting, you know, the context that you provided, Chris, is really helpful. And there's this kind of contemporary focus on school choice and Michigan. But I don't think people are always aware about the kind of foundation of school choice and Michigan, going back even further than that, into the 70s. With the *Milliken* case, I don't know if you want to talk about the irony of the contemporary work given that foundation.

Chris T.:

Yeah, those are some important connections that our team has made. The *Milliken v. Bradley* Supreme Court decision happened in 1974. That was a ruling based on a busing plan in metropolitan Detroit that attempted to bus students from the suburbs into Detroit, and students from Detroit into the suburbs. That faced really heavy challenges from many suburban districts. There were just over 50 districts involved in that case, and ultimately, the Supreme Court ruled that school districts cannot be forced to bus students across district clusterings, and parents don't have to comply. And that had really important implications for desegregation efforts that had been happening across the country. So it's interesting to think in that historical context, how not so long ago, actually, there were many districts in Metropolitan Detroit that were fighting to keep students from Detroit out of their district. And now for many reasons, particularly the financial implications of accepting transfer students, there are many, many districts

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in Detroit that get a pretty big chunk of their student population from transfer students from Detroit now.

Alounso G.:

And I'll just go ahead and add to that. So I worked with Dr. Yun to look at this quantitatively. So we merged data, OCR data, census data and desegregation data to create one data set that allowed us to look at demographics over time. From there we calculated what's called a dissimilarity index. It's an index, or a statistic that's used to look at the difference between percentage distributions. Here we were looking at race, obviously, because we're looking at desegregation. And what we noticed is in the 1970s, which is sort of like this pre-*Milliken* period, and in the 1980s, which is this *Milliken* period, there wasn't a lot of movement in terms of demographics across the 53 *Milliken* districts. However, once we got to 1995, we noticed starting from there through 2013, which is what we've had data for, that there are big shifts occurring with a lot of students transferring out of Detroit, into the districts around Detroit.

We want to emphasize that a lot of these were one way transfers, There's declining enrollment in Detroit and these transfers were going out of Detroit, which speaks to what Chris was talking about, when we're looking at who's leaving and who's staying in these different communities. So then we decided to explore this a little further, and we had conversations with legislators who were around during the time of Proposal A. We had talks with legislators on both sides, and what we found was that there are, even though Proposal A had this sort of desegregative effect right? There was no actual discussion, or very little discussion of race when coming up with a proposal. A lot of it was equity, but equity defined through financial equity, and things of that nature, without explicitly naming race. Which kind of

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speaks to, you know, sometimes policies can be colorblind. And we were really interested in that aspect of Proposal A, and exploring that.

Courtney M.:

So for our listeners, we have people who are listening from a variety of states, right. And they may be thinking, why Michigan? But I think why Michigan because of much of what you all have mentioned, and how cases like *Milliken* have an influence on what happens in other places. So can you all talk about the Benton Harbor case? I know that that's something that's now being talked about in more research. So how does what you're talking about connect to what's happening in Benton Harbor? Can you talk about what's happening there and what that might mean for other places?

Chris T.:

Sure. Benton Harbor was in the news this past summer, because of Governor Gretchen Whitmer's proposed plan to close the high school. That plan was in response to many, many years of the district being under-resourced, facing quickly declining enrollment, and financial trouble because of that declining enrollment. In many ways, Benton Harbor, because of these enrollment issues in response to school choice and then other struggles that urban districts face, we see them as a good example of the troubles in urban districts and the consequences of policy intervention, not just in Michigan, but also across the Midwest—and really across the north. Benton Harbor, if you go back and look at their history, they also had a desegregation case in the 1960s. And the remedies of the findings of that desegregation case, a lot of people actually think that contributed to white flight and in some ways the decline of the district, so there's important policy implications to consider there. And then also, the government responses to the struggles of the district have... a lot of folks say that those responses have have made things worse.

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So, it seems that this past summer, the situation in Benton Harbor really came to a head in which, you know, in the last couple of decades, several policymakers have said, “something needs to be done in Benton Harbor. We gotta do something.” So then we have the governor's plan of closing the high school, and certainly really open for debate whether that was a viable strategy. But something that's really important within that community is the counter-narrative of folks within the community, and particularly within the high school, who said, "we don't want to lose our high school, this is a big part of our identity." And there are all these wonderful success stories that people were sharing in social media and through traditional media about the impact that Benton Harbor schools had on their education and their life. So I think maybe Alounso is going to talk a little bit more about those sorts of issues in Benton Harbor.

Alounso G.:

Yeah, so what we really want to emphasize, and we were looking at Benton Harbor is sort of, as Chris was saying, an exemplar, but also to talk broadly about policies in urban districts and how we think about those things, and how they affect the people in the communities. There's this book by Richard Rothstein that has kind of become a bible for me called *Color of Law* that talks about policies within the context of how they are affect the people who they're intended for, right? The thesis of this is even if laws and policies are unintentionally racist, which you know, is a stretch to believe, right? The knowledge of the effect of those require us to act. But the action, the policies that are passed a lot of times in these examples are often colorblind and don't include the community.

So we wanted to focus on counter-narratives, because counter-narratives allow us to splinter narratives of communities, or of groups or cultures or anything like that, and really speak truth to things that are going on. Kind of

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tearing down presuppositions or thoughts that already exist. We wanted to do this work in general to really speak to the idea that policy has effects, it affects different communities in different ways and things like that. And communities usually have things to say, but are they being heard in the discussions? Are they being included in the ways that things are being done? Are they being included in the analysis of the "unintended," while I'll use quotes for that, effects of these sort of things? And we really wanted to dig in and and look at that.

Terah V. C.:

Yeah, if I just kind of think about the way that this research team is positioned to speak to a couple of important policy considerations here, there are there are a couple of things. First, I think that this kind of increasing desegregation in suburban schools is seen by a lot of people as a good thing. And I think it could be a good thing, but I don't think it's an unqualified good thing. And that's where the work on racial opportunity cost comes in to say, "when you have unintended desegregation, and you have an increasingly diverse student population in a school district that is not prepared to work competently with that population, what happens?" And my work says not so great things can happen as a result of that, if we're not working with districts to be more responsive to their student populations.

And then I think related to that, as Chris and Alounso have said, this work, you know, when things come up in Benton Harbor or in Detroit or in other urban areas, and the inclination can be to blame Benton Harbor for the financial situation that they've been in, or to say, "there should have been this response," or "they should have been more responsible here," or "these things should have happened." And it's not just Benton Harbor, it's in communities all across the state and across the region and across this country. When we look at the historical considerations, there are decades of

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disinvestment, of financial neglect, of these schools—these communities—really being disrespected. And then to come in and put the blame on them is really unfortunate. And I think that it's our intention, my intention anyway, is to serve almost as a conscience here for the community, to remind ourselves, to remind our policymakers, that these decisions didn't happen in a vacuum. And there are important historical considerations to what happened and how we got to where we are. And that's what I think this research team is really trying to bring to the forefront.

Courtney M.: Absolutely. Well, thank you all for being here today and sharing your expertise in this area. I learned a lot and I'm sure our listeners did too. Thank you.

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Understanding Benton Harbor and School Choice



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