



*[Image description: A medical mask hanging on a desk chair in an empty classroom.]*



## **Equity by Design:**

COVID-19, Equity, and School Integration:  
Rebuilding Education for the Public Good

Sarah Diem

Brittany Smotherson

# COVID-19, Equity, and School Integration: Rebuilding Education for the Public Good

Public schools in the United States are highly segregated by race and economic status. The most recent data show that over the last 30 years, economic segregation has increased by 50% in large school districts, while segregation between white and Black students and white and Asian students has also increased significantly (Owens et al., 2022). This segregation continues to be most evident between school districts, although within school district segregation is increasing (Owens et al., 2022). Segregation has also been well documented to be a driving factor in the educational opportunities provided to students attending public schools (Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012; Orfield et al., 2012). Students, the majority of whom are low-income and non-white, who attend racially and economically segregated schools are less likely to have the same resources and learning opportunities as their peers in diverse school settings (Orfield & Lee, 2005). This lack of resources has been further amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, and exposed what many people already knew regarding the existent inequities in opportunity in the U.S. public education system (U.S. DOE, 2021).

In Spring 2020, schools across the United States closed their doors and in-person classes moved to online formats as COVID-19 began to move through communities. According to the 2020-21 National Teacher and Principal Survey, 77% of public schools moved their instruction to online distance-

learning formats (Berger et al., 2022). A higher percentage of public school teachers in cities (86%) and suburbs (87%) reported moving all or some of their classes online as compared to teachers in towns (75%) and rural communities (77%) (Berger et al., 2022). Moreover, white students were more likely to be enrolled in in-person classes during the pandemic while technology/internet served more as a barrier to Black and Latinx students as they tried to participate in online instruction/distance learning (U.S. DOE, 2021). Asian/Asian American students were the least likely to be enrolled in in-person instruction during the pandemic and many noted that they may not return to the physical classroom in fear of being targeted and attacked due to the rise of anti-Asian violence since the start of the pandemic (U.S. DOE, 2021).

As of June 2022, over 86 million COVID-19 cases and one million deaths have been reported in the United States (CDC, 2022). Black and Latinx families have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Black and Latinx adults are more likely to be hospitalized or die due to complications of COVID-19 in part because they are more likely to be in essential worker positions (U.S. DOE, 2021). As of early 2021, data showed that Black children made up 20% of children that lost a parent to COVID-19, despite only making up 14% of U.S. children (U.S. DOE, 2021). Additionally, Black and Latinx families are more likely to live in more densely populated and segregated neighborhoods and research

shows that segregation is associated with poor health outcomes (Williams & Collins, 2001). In relation to COVID-19, which is more likely to spread through close contact and interaction among individuals, particularly in in-door settings, segregation may actually contribute to disparities in COVID-19 infection and transmission (Anderson et al., 2021).



**[Image description: Feminine-presenting high school-aged Black student in a medical mask, walking out of a school building.]**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, historically minoritized and marginalized students, particularly Black, Latinx, and Native American students, attended schools that had far fewer resources and educational opportunities than their white peers (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2018). Indeed, well before the pandemic non-white students were attending racially and economically segregated schools with less-experienced teachers, less funding, and less access to more advanced curricula (Linn & Welner, 2007; Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012). And while we may have some initial figures that

illustrate the pandemic's disproportionate impact on non-white students by race, it will take time and research to fully understand its impact on our education systems. However, if we can create policies and practices now that address and redress educational inequities, perhaps we can create better educational futures for students.

In this *Equity by Design* research brief, we discuss the impact of COVID-19 on school segregation and integration in public schools. COVID-19 raised a lot of discussions already occurring around school choice, which connects to a larger conversation on the purpose of education and it being one of the most important public goods in American society (Borman et al., 2012). Yet, efforts to prioritize school choice and further privatization only increased during COVID-19, despite it bringing to the surface a deep-seated crisis we are facing when it comes to providing equitable access and opportunity in education (Strauss, 2021). Thus, we also discuss how the notion of education as a public good has waned over time, particularly in recent presidential administrations, which is contributing to many of the struggles experienced during COVID-19, particularly during its onset. We conclude the brief discussing the need for the new approaches to school integration in the current educational context and offer examples of how we may better center equity in such approaches.

## Segregation, Integration, and COVID-19

COVID-19 has had devastating effects on society. In highly segregated communities, these effects were only exacerbated. In 2020, over 50% of metropolitan areas in the U.S. were more segregated than they were 30 years prior (Menendian et al., 2021). In these segregated metropolitan areas, particularly those that have higher Black-white and Latinx-white segregation, COVID-19 cases and deaths have been higher (Yu et al., 2021). For example, in St. Louis, one of the most segregated U.S. cities where the Black population is almost 50%, Black Americans make up 75% of COVID-19 cases and deaths, the highest in the nation (Johnson et al., 2020). Indeed, the structural racism and inequality existent in the United States can have devastating consequences (Menendian et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2021).

These harmful effects of the pandemic have been particularly pronounced in public schools. García and Weiss (2020) poignantly note,

Our public education system was not built, nor prepared, to cope with a situation like this—we lack the structures to sustain effective teaching and learning during the shutdown and to provide the safety net supports that many children receive in school. (p. 3)

Moreover, before the pandemic schools that are predominantly racially and economically segregated were already facing dire circumstances. As we previously stated, while we are still trying to fully

comprehend the weight of COVID-19 in school communities, there are preliminary data on the challenges school districts are facing in trying to maintain and/or create racially and economically diverse school settings as the pandemic continues to unfold. We highlight a couple of examples below.



*[Image description: School backpack hanging on a chair in a classroom, with school supplies and a medical face mask sticking out. There is hand sanitizer on the desk in front of it.]*

### Omaha Public Schools

Omaha Public Schools (OPS) is the largest and most diverse school district in Nebraska, serving about 53,000 students. Over the last 20 years, the district has witnessed steady gains in its overall enrollment (OPS, 2021). It is an urban school district with a long history of desegregation efforts, which led to white flight and increased racial and economic segregation in the metropolitan area (Diem, 2012; Holme et al., 2009). Indeed, the district had been experiencing a consistent decline in white student enrollment prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the drop in these numbers more

than doubled in 2020 (Fogarty, 2022). During the pandemic, 1,600 white students left OPS and the district experienced its lowest overall enrollment since the 2013-2014 school year (OPS, 2021). This decline in white student enrollment not only contributes to increased racial segregation but also has serious financial consequences for OPS (Fogarty, 2022).

### *New York City Public Schools*

In New York City, which is home to one of the most segregated school districts in the U.S. (Kucsera & Orfield, 2014) and was the hub for COVID-19 in spring 2020, ideas of what educational equity should look like in a public education system during a global pandemic varied between activist groups (Castillo et al., 2021). For instance, one study found that while there was a heightened sense of urgency around school integration because of COVID-19 and the racial reckoning occurring in the U.S. after the murder of George Floyd, and an increase in integration advocacy efforts, there was a clear divide on the purpose of public education in a district reliant on school choice (Castillo et al., 2021). That is, integration activists envision education to serve the public good and advance democratic equality, which necessitates changes in the current system. However, meritocratic activists believe education helps advance social mobility and social efficiency and the current system works well because it rewards those students who work hard (Castillo et al., 2021). These tensions between the activist groups highlight the ongoing debate around how education (should) serve the public good.

## Education as a Public or Private Good

School (re)segregation is not an organic phenomenon. The federal and local governments have long since contributed to the desegregation and (re)segregation efforts post-*Brown v. Board of Education* (1955), or *Brown II* (see Diem, 2019; Diem & Smotherson, 2022). At the time of the *Brown* (1954, 1955) decisions, access to a quality education standard was deemed a public good. Yet, these decisions negate their predecessor *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) by determining segregated school systems were and could not provide equal education access, and that the public had a right to that access. This was not an overwhelmingly favorable perspective shared in many white communities, and desegregation efforts were met with heavy resistance. Although early desegregation resistance was effective through government-supported residential segregation efforts such as redlining, once the Court began mandating and overseeing desegregation plans in school districts, these plans often included or occurred alongside school choice allowances such as magnet school provisions (e.g., *Morgan v. Kerrigan*, 1975).

The introduction and reliance on school choice in relation to desegregation efforts has contributed to the quality education standard shifting from a public to a private good within the government, with many decisions no longer prioritizing racial diversity in schools to avoid returning to *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) rhetoric. In reaction to *Brown II* (1955), southern segregationists mobilized to protect the new right to choose schools, forming a basis of where we are today: “school choice in its



contemporary form developed in fierce opposition to desegregation” (Hale, 2021, p.19). A major turning point for school (re) segregation was the *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007) decision. With it, the Court determined race could be considered in school decisions but could not be the sole factor. This, coupled with the Bush administration’s race-neutral stance marked a very clear emphasis in disregarding the legacy of racial discrimination in the U.S. and the corresponding structures that have manifested or lingered, and moved firmly into a more individualistic, meritocratic approach of students having access to educational opportunities based on what they and their families have “worked hard” to provide (Trotter, 2006).

*Parents Involved* (2007) in true implementation fell to the Obama administration. Under Obama, the U.S. Department of Education issued guidance on voluntary use of race to achieve diversity and avoid racial isolation (U.S. DOJ & U.S. DOE, 2011) as well as promoted school grants to increase school diversity (U.S. DOE, 2016). However, with the reauthorization of the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, a policy with Bush-era *No Child Left Behind Act* foundations that incorporates families to choice out of low-performing schools (Education Week, 2015), and the Obama administration’s pro-charter school promotion (Obama, 2016), the Obama years promoted racial diversity and school choice. As school choice has taken on more of a (re)segregation approach under the guise of educational access as a private good obtained with meritocratic efforts (Castillo et al., 2021; Hale, 2021), promoting both racial diversity

and school choice, particularly as separate actions, seems to be at odds with one another. Additionally, the Supreme Court during these years continued to issue decisions in line with school choice and education as a private good, and withdrew Court-mandated accountability of school districts in meeting the “Green factors” of desegregating (1) facilities; (2) student, (3) faculty, and (4) staff assignments; (5) transportation; and (6) extracurricular activities (*Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, 1968), declaring unitary status instead (Dryden, 2015). This is particularly noteworthy because Green (1968) struck down freedom of choice policies, and with the Court issuing pro-school choice decisions, the next presidential administration was positioned to support school choice as well.

As the Trump administration took office, the government had already issued multiple policies toward school choice, which facilitated the appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of the Department of Education, whose background and interests were unabashedly pro-school choice. Under DeVos, white families used their privilege to relocate to more academically and economically favorable schools, and the government continued to lax its school desegregation monitoring (Fogarty, 2022). The Trump administration also positioned school choice as “the civil rights issue of the year” (Whistle, 2015) and unsuccessfully pushed the government to give tax credits to organizations offering school choice scholarships (Skinner, 2019). However, Trump signed Executive Order 13969 (2020) that stated COVID-19 had caused a significant learning loss, and to remedy this, authorized the use of funds for

a variety of means, including emergency learning scholarships to parochial and private schools, homeschool, microschool, or learning-pod costs. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education stopped monitoring and enforcing desegregation orders (Greene, 2019).

Yet, efforts to prioritize school choice and further privatization only increased during COVID-19, despite it bringing to the surface a deep-seated crisis we are facing when it comes to providing equitable access and opportunity in education.

As an administration marked as one highly favorable of school choice, the Trump administration lost bipartisan support of charter schools that was held up until this point and as a result, the Biden administration came in under an anti-charter school agenda (Turner, 2020). Although the Biden Administration may have come in as anti-charter schools, a stance generally seen as more favorable currently, the reputation President Biden held as Senator Biden was one of anti-busing for integration purposes (Ross, 2019). Though, most recently President Biden signed Executive Order 13985 on advancing racial equity in acknowledgement of *Brown* (1955) being unrealized (Exec. Order No. 13985, 2021).

### **New Approaches to Increase Racial and Economic Diversity**

Much of the federal government's involvement in the desegregation (and resegregation) efforts has come through the judicial branch via landmark Supreme Court cases or the executive branch, via executive orders, guidance, and proclamations. Over

the years, the Supreme Court has determined desegregation plans are not permanent and has released school districts from federal oversight. Recently, the Court ruled in favor of public funds being used for private schools (*Carson v. Makin*, 2022), which may assist in further reducing public funding, and may contribute to increased school segregation. With this trend, it is likely the current Court will continue to facilitate (re)segregation with its rulings and lack of oversight from previous rulings. Additionally, under the most recent administrations, the U.S. Department of Education has gone back and forth on its (lack of) support for race-based policies as well as prioritization of education as a public good.

Although the Biden administration signed an executive order toward advancing racial equity, there is more work that can be done in this administration. Currently the legislative branch has proposed the *Strength in Diversity Act* (2021) in the House (passed in 2020), which if passed by the Senate, would be complementary to President Biden's Executive Order 13985. If the Biden administration shows support for this bill, perhaps it may finally pass and the U.S. Department of Education will be able to administer it. This plus the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, which removes the prohibition of federal transportation funds to support school integration, could support ushering in a new wave of voluntary integration programs across the country. Some of the work is already underway.

On March 11, 2021, President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which provided \$1.9 trillion for COVID-19

relief, \$125 billion of which was allocated for K-12 education. Schools and school districts have a lot of latitude on how to use the ARP funding, which can provide spaces for programs and initiatives that prioritize equity and educational opportunities for historically minoritized and marginalized students. For example, Chicago Public Schools, as part of their Moving Forward Together initiative, created an Unfinished Learning School Investment Index which uses a number of factors (i.e., opportunity index, student mobility, COVID-19 cases in zip codes, trauma exposure in surrounding school communities) to identify schools and students that need the most support (CPS, 2022). The Minnesota Department of Education engaged in various outreach efforts with community members and stakeholders to create a state ARP plan that ensures “supports are provided in a culturally appropriate way, that community partners are engaged when appropriate, and that schools and districts are proactive in providing services to students and families” (MN Department of Education, n.d., p. 3). And in Missouri, the St. Louis Public Schools district is working to ensure that their funding is allocated in an equitable and sustainable manner that supports their three key priorities of supporting the whole child, expanding 21st century schools, and investing in district staff (SLPS, 2021).

Although federal support can be tremendously helpful in COVID-19 rebuilding and school desegregation efforts, school districts and states can still act absent immediate federal intervention. As policies are created and upheld at all levels, school district administrators should consider an equity-based policy

realignment that implements proven effective school integration models such as creating thematic schools (e.g., dual language, arts, STEM), using weighted lottery programs, and (re)drawing district lines that facilitate schools being more racially and economically diverse (Smotherson & Diem, 2022).



***[Image description: Three masculine-presenting elementary-aged students of Color in medical masks.]***

As we continue to endure COVID-19 and recover from all it has taken from society and school communities in particular, it is essential that our rebuilding efforts include (re)creating education systems that center the value of public education *and* racial and economic diversity. We have the tools to ensure that equitable educational opportunities and learning environments are accessible to all students - now we must act.

## About the Authors

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**Sarah Diem** is a Professor of Educational Policy and Leadership in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri, and an Equity Fellow with the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center. Her research focuses on the sociopolitical and geographic contexts of education, paying particular attention to how politics, leadership, and implementation of educational policies affect outcomes related to equity, opportunity, and racial diversity within public schools.

**Brittany Smotherson** is a doctoral student at the University of Missouri in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, with an emphasis in Higher Education Administration and certificates in Qualitative Research and Education Policy. Her research interests include higher education internationalization, Black women, and critical theories and methodologies.

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## **About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center**

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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## **Disclaimer**

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