

Diversity Offers a Clear Path to Brighter Futures for All Children

By John B. King, Jr., CEO and President of The Education Trust and Former U.S. Secretary of Education

Our children live in a more diverse country than ever before. And America is projected to become even more racially and ethnically diverse in the coming decades.

In fact, by some estimates, by 2055, the U.S. will not have a single racial or ethnic majority. This shift in our population will happen in our lifetimes—or, for many of us, at least in our children’s lifetimes. In some communities, this already may be a reality. We also know that today, for the first time, our public schools now serve a majority of students of color.

But, despite the increasing diversity of our communities and our nation, our schools are segregated by both race and class.

Indeed, more than 60 years after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision that declared “separate but equal” schools unconstitutional, American public schools in many areas are more segregated now than in previous decades.

The increasing segregation of our schools is deeply troubling because, especially in today’s world, diversity isn’t some vague ideal; it’s a path to better outcomes and brighter futures for all of America’s children.

For example, young people’s experiences in diverse classrooms can expose them to different perspectives and cultures, which can help prepare them for engaged citizenship and to contribute to our society and our democracy.

Diversity also offers the kind of contact and meaningful connections with people from varying backgrounds that have been shown to boost empathy and reduce bias.

Yet, research provides us with striking examples of highly segregated schools. The Century Foundation has revealed that in Washington, D.C., a public school with just *11 percent* low-income students and another public school with *nearly 100 percent* low-income students are located just *one mile* apart. In my native home of New York City, which has 4 million white residents, a Latina high school student may not encounter a white classmate until she enrolls in college.

When our youth are denied the chance to learn alongside classmates who are different from them, they also are denied the preparation for the real world they will inhabit as adults.

To be sure, the ability to work with men and women from every background—rich or poor; black, white, or brown; Christian, Jewish, or Muslim—will be a core competency for the jobs all our kids will have some day.

Much of the business world understands the value of diversity. Racial diversity, for example, has been linked to enhanced financial performance at innovation-focused banks. And some studies have shown that female representation in top corporate management positions can lead to increases in productivity and returns.

Research by Katherine W. Phillips, a professor and senior vice dean at Columbia Business School, shows that diversity *actually makes us smarter*. It encourages us to search for new information and perspectives, and to consider alternatives to our own ideas. And in this way, it enhances our creativity.

Dr. Phillips' research also reveals that, in the presence of diversity, people become more diligent. In diverse groups, people assume that they will have to put in more mental effort to support their views or come to a consensus. This takes hard work, and—as Dr. Phillips points out—just like exercise, that process makes us stronger.

It's clear: the reasons to think carefully about new diversity strategies are powerful. And I'm convinced that we must increase our efforts in this regard in our schools.

The Century Foundation has highlighted 100 school districts and charter schools across the country that are working to increase diversity by using socioeconomic status as a factor in student assignment. This is encouraging and may go a long way toward building more diverse schools for our students, but it's just a fraction of our nation's more than 14,000 school districts.

Montgomery County, Maryland provides us with some lessons. Data have shown that children in public housing who attended the district's most advantaged elementary schools performed better over time than those attending higher-poverty schools, despite additional per-student funding provided at the higher-poverty schools. And the presence of low-income children in the affluent schools did not negatively impact the academic performance of the more affluent students.

This is just one of many examples demonstrating what more and more studies are showing: increasing diversity has the power to pay off for all children. That's why it is especially troubling that the Trump administration's Education Department discontinued a program begun under the Obama administration that would have helped districts to boost socioeconomic diversity within their schools.

We need more districts and states to take the lead in creating voluntary initiatives that increase the integration of our schools, particularly because diversity can play an important role in helping our students to thrive. But there are other reasons why communities should be taking action on integration, too.

According to a new report, if Chicago reduced segregation, it would see \$8 billion in economic growth; 229 fewer homicides in the city last year; and 83,000 more residents with bachelor's degrees.

Across the nation, the economic and moral imperatives for this work are clear.

As it stands today, affluent young people are more than six times as likely as low-income students to graduate from college. This dynamic does nothing to set up our communities or our country for economic success.

And it's hard to miss the fact that when the children of dishwashers and doctors are confined to separate schools, equality of opportunity is not achievable. It's no secret whose school ends up with the most resources—from state-of-the-art science labs and brand-new buildings, to the latest education technology, to AP courses that will set up students to excel in college and beyond.

We have a ways to go to expand opportunity in America. But I'm hopeful about the possibilities. Let's get to work.