

THE ATLANTIC, APRIL 6, 2017

The New Champions of School Integration

The Department of Education killed a federal program supporting diversity efforts, but the fight to desegregate the nation's classroom is far from over.



Lucy Nicholson / Reuters

RICHARD D. KAHLENBERG

Policies that promote school integration by race and class took a significant hit last week when the U.S. Department of Education [announced](#) that it was killing a small but important federal program to support local diversity efforts. The initiative, “Opening Doors, Expanding Opportunities,” was slated to provide \$12 million to school districts to boost socioeconomic diversity. The brainchild of President Obama’s Secretary of Education, John B. King Jr., the program had attracted interest from 26 school districts across the country that believed kids would be better off in schools that educate rich and poor, and white and minority students, together rather than separately.

According to the *Washington Post*, an Education Department spokesperson said the program was nixed because “it was not a wise use of tax dollars, in part because the money was to be used for planning, not implementation.” But supporters of the plan rejected that view. Representative Bobby Scott, a Virginia Democrat and the ranking member of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, [said](#), “Continuing this important program would have been an easy way for the Trump

Administration to affirm its commitment to civil rights. Unfortunately, the Trump administration missed that opportunity.”

By coincidence, as the news of the program’s discontinuation broke, proponents of school diversity, including King, were gathering at the Harvard Graduate School of Education for a strategic-planning conference on school-diversity efforts. The day-long meeting, sponsored by Harvard’s Reimagining Integration program, the National Coalition on School Diversity, and The Century Foundation (where I work), brought together 50 scholars, civil-rights activists, and educators to plot out new strategies for school diversity in the age of Trump.

The decision by Donald Trump’s education secretary, Betsy DeVos, to kill Opening Doors was a reminder, if any was needed, that proponents of school diversity need to look beyond the federal government for support during Trump’s administration. The decision on whether to proceed with the Opening Doors program, Philip Tegeler of the Poverty and Race Research Action Council told Patrick Wall in an *Atlantic* [article](#) last month, was “going to be a real test of her commitment to school integration.” And now she had failed.

At the conference, King called the decision a “heartbreaking signal” on an issue of utmost importance. Students of color represent more than 50 percent of public-school students, King noted, and “the fate of the country” will be determined by how well it decides to educate this new majority of students. School integration is also tied to “the fate of our democracy,” he suggested, because segregated schools allow politicians to scapegoat minorities, while integrated schools remind students of what they have in common as Americans. [Research](#) finds that school diversity reduces racial prejudice and improves academic attainment, which, in turn, is tied to higher voter participation.

The death of a small federal school-integration initiative is connected to a much larger concern that DeVos’s primary education-reform idea—using public money for private school vouchers—will produce poor academic results for students, and Balkanize students by religion, race, and class. As my Century Foundation colleague Halley Potter noted in a new report, “voucher programs on balance are more likely to increase school segregation than to decrease it or leave it at status quo.”

King reminded participants, however, that this was not a moment “to admire the problem,” but a time to engage in fresh thinking about new approaches. What options do supporters of diversity have? Could progressives capitalize on DeVos’s rhetoric around school choice—particularly, the compelling need to liberate kids from struggling, high-poverty schools—to encourage choice within the public-school system that is designed to bring children of different backgrounds together? Should progressives pivot from Washington to focus on progressive states and localities? What is the role of foundations? What about state courts?

Progressives in blue states appear to have a strong appetite for pushing against Donald Trump’s agenda on issues from immigration to climate change. Could this sentiment provide an important spark for school diversity initiatives? Under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states are required to devote 7 percent of Title I funds to improving the lowest-performing schools. New York state has a program (begun by King when he was its education commissioner) to use federal school-improvement funds to turn around struggling schools by implementing attractive magnet programs. Research suggests that low-income students in mixed-income schools—surrounded by peers who expect to go on to college, parents in the school community who regularly volunteer in

class, and strong teachers—perform substantially better than comparable students in high-poverty schools that often lack those ingredients for success.

State charter-school laws, likewise, could set aside a certain proportion of charter-school funds—say, 25 percent—for schools that are diverse by design, using a weighted lottery to ensure that school choice promotes socioeconomic diversity.

Local school districts, as well, can forge ahead with diversity plans, with or without federal support. The day after Trump's election, for example, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, school board voted 9-0 to adopt a socioeconomic-integration plan for its magnet schools, a reminder that under the United States system of federalism, changes in Washington don't have to spell the end of education movements. (I worked with the district on this project).

What should be the role of courts in pursuing school-diversity strategies today?

Nationally, the Century Foundation has identified 100 school districts and charter-school chains that voluntarily are pursuing diversity policies that consider student economic status in their student assignment plans. With philanthropic support, these districts could form a community of practice to support one another and expand the number of districts pursuing diversity policies by showing how it can be done in a politically palatable way that is also good for kids.

In growing the movement for integrated schools, participants at the Harvard conference discussed how various constituencies—civil-rights groups, business leaders, people of faith, students, and teachers unions—might support diversity. Sarah Camiscoli, the director of IntegrateNYC4me, a student group that is seeking school integration in New York City, suggested bringing in new constituencies, such as military veterans, firefighters, and police officers who are focused on the public good. A message that “integration is the fair choice that works for the common good and personal achievement” could resonate with people in these professions, she said, adding that veterans also have personal experience working in a diverse institution.

David Hinojosa, who works with the education department to provide school districts the technical support they need to promote civil rights, discussed ways in which low-income communities and communities of color can be reassured that integration does not suggest that they possess deficiencies but rather that they bring strengths that will add to a healthy school environment. Likewise, some participants asked, would framing school integration primarily around socioeconomic status unite the interests of working-class people of color who supported Hillary Clinton and working-class, white Trump supporters, thereby scrambling existing political alliances?

Finally, because the school-integration movement famously gained national attention with the landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, it is natural to ask: What should be the role of courts in pursuing school-diversity strategies today?

In recent years, the federal courts have been an impediment, such as when the Supreme Court struck down voluntary racial-integration plans in Louisville, Kentucky, and Seattle in 2007. But socioeconomic-integration plans are perfectly legal. And state courts have an important role to play interpreting state constitutions to foster school integration.

The best example is the Connecticut Supreme Court, which in the 1996 case of *Sheff v. O'Neill* ruled that segregation between Hartford schools and the surrounding suburbs violated the state constitution, whether or not the segregation was intentional. James Ryan, the dean of Harvard's Education School, has been writing for decades about the idea of replicating Sheff-type state-level decisions in places where courts have found a constitutional right to a decent education. Given research suggesting that socioeconomic school integration is an even more powerful lever for boosting achievement than funding, he has suggested that state finance litigation be extended to integration. Now, at the conference, he wondered: Could the time be opportune, given that "courts have found their voice" in promoting democratic values in the age of Trump, resisting, for example, the ban on immigration from majority-Muslim nations? Might the courts be newly open to lawsuits that seek to encourage efforts to ensure that children of different backgrounds have the opportunity to learn together and from one another?

It may be the worst of times for school integration at the federal level, but could this be the best time for progressive school boards and state courts, newly energized by the national political scene, to embrace an education reform that will strengthen American democracy?

RICHARD D. KAHLENBERG is a senior fellow at The Century Foundation and author of *The Remedy: Class, Race, and Affirmative Action*.