

### What You Can Do in the Face of School Segregation

#### 5 steps for school and district leaders to make schools more equitable

By Michele Shannon

October 8, 2018

By most analyses, schools across the country are as segregated today as they were during the Civil Rights era. Both racial and economic segregation are growing. And for many young people of color, when the two come together, it usually means less access to great teachers and challenging classes, and a greater likelihood of being held back or suspended. The percentage of public schools where between **75 to 100 percent of students are both poor and Black or Latino has nearly doubled since 2000**, according to a 2016 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office.



For district and school leaders, taking on segregation might seem like a daunting, if not impossible, task. After all, school integration efforts in the United States have had a winding and tortuous history. Policies have been tried and failed or abandoned; court mandates have been issued, and undone.

However, integration must be part of a leader's plan to address inequities in her schools. Students who attend majority high-poverty schools are less likely to go to college and more likely to drop out of high school. I'm living proof of this. Growing up, I went to schools where almost all my classmates were children of color like me. I dropped out of college, completely unprepared for the academic rigor, and took years to muster the courage to make my way back to the university.

Contrast that with racially and socioeconomically integrated schools, where research has found smaller achievement gaps between students of color and their white classmates compared to similar more segregated schools.

Tackling inequities takes strong, brave, and thoughtful leadership. In my work with both district and school leaders at the NYC Leadership Academy, I have seen how a handful of research-based leadership dispositions can help them take steps to make their schools more equitable.

#### 1. Reflect on your personal assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors.

Addressing segregation requires that we talk openly about its root cause: racism and implicit bias. For school system leaders to be able to lead productive and difficult discussions with staff, students, and community members about deep-seated racial bias and how it has played out in their community, leaders must first reflect on their own beliefs and behaviors. If, as leaders, we are not aware of how

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our own racial identity and biases play out in our work, then we are simply perpetuating opportunity and achievement gaps. As the founding principal of a New York City school for six years whose students, while predominately black, hailed from many different cultures, I had to actively explore my own African-American identity while learning about and affirming my students' experiences. As former Saint Paul, Minn., superintendent Valeria Silva has said about the results of her own self-reflection, "I began walking the schools differently, asking principals different questions, noticing how parents got access to schools, or didn't."

**living proof of this."**

## **2. Publicly model a personal belief system that is student-centered and grounded in equity.**

When you take discussions about race to your staff, school board members, or families, you will inevitably get some pushback. This work is uncomfortable—many of us are afraid that we will be called a racist—so resistance is normal. As leaders, we can model vulnerability by talking publicly about our own identity, biases, and privilege and the work we are doing to become more aware of them. For example, longtime superintendent John Deasy—with whom I worked when he led the Los Angeles Unified School District and I was supporting the development of the district's school leadership pipeline—has consistently modeled his commitment to racial equity by openly discussing the privilege he carries as a white man.

## **3. Act with cultural competence and responsiveness in interactions, decisionmaking, and practice.**

As we model our beliefs, we can then begin to integrate them into our work. As chief of schools in Boston from 2015 to 2017, I was charged with helping turn around some of the city's lowest-performing schools whose students were almost entirely children of color. Basing every decision on the needs of each student, my team and I prioritized integrating the mostly white staff, because we knew students would benefit from a more diverse group of teachers. We communicated the urgency of our work to students, parents, and community-based organizations supporting the turnaround efforts. We offered a clear vision for what the schools' demographic data meant for the kind of education we envisioned would meet the needs of each child.

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## **4. Confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schools, and low expectations associated with race.**

To support your staff and families in taking on this work, you will need to facilitate their learning around how to think and talk about race and segregation. It's critical to make it clear that you expect everyone to participate in this work, and then to personalize the learning so that each person can engage from wherever they are. This means devoting more resources, as New York City Department of Education announced in May it will do by investing **\$23 million in anti-bias training** for educators.

## **5. Create systems and structures to promote equity with a focus on race.**

Finally, to truly address inequities, district and school leaders must lead systemic change, which requires looking at structures across an entire school or district—from curriculum to human resources—through an equity lens. How do you determine the needs of different subgroups of students across your district? How do you decide how district resources are allocated? In San Antonio, the district's chief innovation officer, Mohammed Choudhury, is doing this by leading a massive integration effort. He convinced the district to use more detailed census tract income data—rather than free and reduced-price lunch data—to define poverty. He has created a magnet school system that admits students through weighted lotteries that reserve a balanced portion of seats for students of different income levels. Recognizing that segregation is not just a school-level issue, he also joined the city's housing task force.

School integration has and will continue to face resistance at every turn, but it must be a critical part of school systems' efforts to close achievement and opportunity gaps. As leaders we can each anchor our work in these dispositions and use them to find a way to enter this work. Our children can't afford for us not to.

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Vol. 38, Issue 08, Pages 16-17

Published in Print: October 10, 2018, as **Five Steps for a More Equitable Future**