

# Commentaries in Urban Education



# Taking Up the Mantle of a Forgotten History: New York City Integration

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*This article suggests that roads to integration and desegregation are two long, forked, rocky paths that can lead to greater educational opportunity for students. Moreover, current integration and desegregation efforts in New York City offer a map along these paths capable of guiding American education systems closer to justice.*

I am often asked to travel across the country to speak about my advocacy on school integration and share my knowledge and experience on the successes of awareness- and coalition-building we have done in New York City (NYC). I always accept these invitations feeling honored and often inadequate because the suggestion that we have had “success” in NYC, especially as the work towards integration is ongoing, belies the fact that racial equity work is a never-ending struggle.

On a recent trip to visit fellow advocates in Washington DC, I walked through my presentation as I do, speaking a mile-a-minute, moving us to the Q&A and conversational part of my talk. In the back of my mind, I worried about time, as I was getting dangerously close to missing my train back to NYC. During this visit, I discovered something new, which helped disrupt my imposter syndrome. As I was saying goodbye to people and getting ready to make a dash for Union Station, I found that the people offering thanks did so less from a place of needing concrete answers to the complex problems integration brings up (although I shared some), but a need for hope that change is possible.

The idea that my work gives people hope humbles me. NYC is home to the largest public school system in the country. We have the opportunity to be a beacon of light in moments of darkness. The movement for integration in NYC is unmatched anywhere across the country in its rapid growth, constituency, complexity, and commitment to racial justice. We have an opportunity to lead the country to *Real Integration*.

## “YOU CAN’T HAVE ONE WITHOUT THE OTHER”: DESEGREGATION AND INTEGRATION

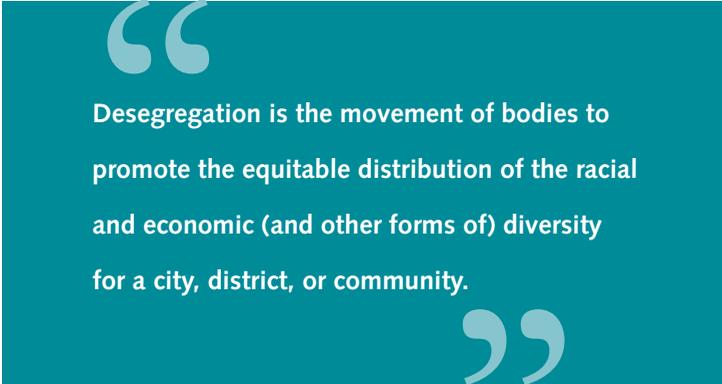
Often, the terms integration and desegregation are used interchangeably. It is important, however, to make a clear distinction between these two concepts, which can help us more effectively consider where our policies and priorities reside. Integration and desegregation are two separate but interrelated mechanisms.

Desegregation is the movement of bodies to promote the equitable distribution of the racial and economic (and other forms of) diversity for a city, district, or community. This must be done by breaking down structural barriers to access (exclusionary enrollment policies) that exclude students of color and by replacing those policies with mechanisms that support mobility and diversity. Many initiatives that were birthed out of the Brown v. Board of Education decision focused on this process.

By contrast, integration is the movement of resources, pedagogy, curriculum, and school cultural practices towards inclusiveness, anti-racism, and universal design. Done together, advocates in NYC believe we can achieve what student leaders have termed *Real Integration*. Only when we invest in *Real Integration* can our students reap the full benefits of diverse spaces. This is what we are working towards in NYC.

### THE MOVEMENT FOR REAL INTEGRATION IN NEW YORK CITY

In recent years, NYC has emerged as a hotbed for discussions of school integration and desegregation. In mid-February 2019, NYC's School Diversity Advisory Group (SDAG) (of which I am a member) released *Making the Grade*, a framework and path towards the *Real Integration* of NYC Schools.<sup>1</sup> The report, a 108 page collaboration of over 40 individuals and organizations, is an invitation to New Yorkers to consider what integration means for this City. It makes the case that diversity benefits all students. It offers a dynamic student-designed framework for this conversation and articulates clear and practical ideas for changing policy and practice. The SDAG convened in December 2018, and picked up the mantle left by Elle Baker, Kenneth Clark, and others who 64 years prior comprised NYC's 1954 Integration Commission.<sup>2</sup> My hope is



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that our report and recommendations meet a different fate than those of our predecessors.

It seems outlandish to say that in 2019, an advisory group had to be convened to think about how to dismantle segregation. However, placed in the larger context, we are just 55 years since the passage of Civil Rights Act and a massive NYC boycott over school segregation (1964),<sup>3</sup> just 65 years since the Supreme Court outlawed educational segregation (1954),<sup>4</sup> and 154 years since the end of slavery (1865).<sup>5</sup> This is just two generations from the darkest parts of this country's history, and unfortunately, many educational leaders have abandoned the mission and merits of integration. Sixty-three years after the 1954 Integration Commission released its recommendations, we are back in a very similar position. While this lack of movement represents intransigence and cowardice among political leaders, entrenched institutional powers, and an unwillingness to confront racism, the fact that the largest urban school district in the country is tackling segregation today is worthy of acknowledgement.

Many attribute the renewed integration action in NYC to a 2014 UCLA Civil Rights Project report titled *Brown at 60*. The report called out NYC for having the most segregated schools in the country and led to subsequent analysis highlighting NYC as the third most segregated school system in the

nation. The absurdity was not lost on New Yorkers who live in one of the most diverse cities on the planet.<sup>6</sup> The report motivated activists and also elicited administrative action by then New York State Commissioner John King with the creation of the Socioeconomic Integration Pilot Program (SIPP), which allowed the use of Title 1 funds to promote economic integration.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note that, while NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio and NYC Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza have been vocal on the need to pursue integration, NYC elected officials have typically avoided the work of integrating NYC Schools. Prior to the arrival of Chancellor Carranza, Mayor de Blasio and former NYC Schools Chancellor Carmen Farina were often roadblocks to meaningful movement towards integration. Beyond the many problematic statements made by both leaders, the real impact came through years of obstruction over NYCDOE District 1 planning process, abandonment of the NYCDOE District 13 planning process, and the unwillingness to even utter the words segregation. Despite this and because of a combination of persistent local advocacy, courageous educators, school and district leaders, and state resources, NYC is finally beginning the important work of integrating NYC Schools. Below, I describe the movement of research, policy, and advocacy between 2012 and 2019, which led to NYC's current integration work.

To be clear, there is a tremendous amount of work to be done to achieve *Real Integration* in NYC, but in my short time working on this issues I have seen significant growth in not only the public awareness of school segregation but also the numerical increase in schools and community school districts pursuing integration policy. When I began this work in 2016, there were about eight individual schools pursuing

integration through the NYCDOE's Diversity In Admissions pilot, and one community school district working towards a district wide plan.

Today, there are more than 70 individual K-12 schools pursuing integration through diversity in admissions plans, three districts (1, 3, 15) with approved integration plans, fourteen more working with NYSED to develop plans,<sup>8</sup> and the city just announced a \$2 million grant program to fund ten more districts to develop integration plans. Additionally, in June of 2018, Mayor de Blasio announced a plan to reform admissions at the City's so called "Specialized High Schools." As noted above, the SDAG has also made comprehensive recommendations for integration. No other city has the type of movement for integration that exists in NYC, and it is important to celebrate this work, while also considering what we can learn from these efforts.

Over the past two years, and more recently with the arrival of Chancellor Carranza, the issue of integration has found its way almost daily into articles, panel discussions, and advocacy spaces as a top priority for the City to tackle. He has spoken powerfully about the issue, embracing the challenge of not just talking about integration but pursuing it. At a town hall in 2018, he said:

Sixty-four years ago, the question of...integrating schools was definitively settled by the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The court said, "separate is never equal," especially in education. But 64 years later, the city and the country have little to show for it.

It has been refreshing to hear Chancellor Carranza acknowledge the importance of seeking integration, and the advocacy community has welcomed his voice

on this issue. However, the debate surrounding integration has necessarily elicited strong feelings from those for and against integration. There is an ongoing city-wide debate, and supporters of the *status quo* have emerged in force.

### WHY NOT JUST SEPARATE BUT EQUAL?

Segregation has existed in the United States since its inception. It represents one of the many threads of division, sewn into the fabric of this country. For many, the issue of segregation and the contemplation of integration died with Dr. King. For many more, the answer to segregation has been to ignore it, and, for those conscious of the damage of segregation, to try and work around it. These responses to segregation, in my opinion, have contributed to the maintenance of the racial and economic hierarchy that this country has always rested upon. This avoidance and complacency with segregation are mechanisms for what I describe as a *segregationist mindset*: one that has accepted segregation and seeks to assimilate to it rather than disrupt it. This segregationist mindset is a threat to democracy, which was so clearly on display in the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump. In education, segregationist mindsets are threats to equity and have resulted in models of education premised on scarcity, hyper-competition, and opportunity hoarding. “Separate but equal” will never be sustainable, and this is why integration is imperative.

The manifestations of segregation go beyond separation and far beyond just the separation of bodies, which undermines democracy. But this separation of people has unfolded a range of impacts that may not always be intuitively connected to segregation. I will attempt to make the connections here. One product of segregation is the strategic divestment in schools serving Black and Latinx students. Battles for

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funding equity have acknowledged segregation as the cause for funding disparities but have seemed to align with a segregationist mindset that separate can be equal. It cannot. Second, segregation and the *segregationist mindset* are premised in deficit narratives and the dehumanization of students of color. Segregation reinforces Eurocentric curriculum, pedagogical methods, and cultural practices that undermine and exclude students of color from accessing education. Third, segregation and a segregationist mindset are essential to the school-to-prison pipeline, targeting punitive and exclusionary discipline practice on students of color. Just as neighborhoods of color are more heavily policed, schools serving majorities of students of color tend to align with more harsh and punitive discipline practices. Lastly, a historic product of desegregation was the mass firing of Black teachers in the South. To this day, this country has never recouped those losses, and the result has ensured that students of color do not feel represented in education.

Each of these impact areas requires intervention to achieve *Real Integration* and align closely with the 1968 Green v. Kent County case more popularly known as “Green Factors.” Green Factors articulated the six areas that desegregation plans must impact: students, faculty and staff assignments, facilities, extracurriculars, and transportation. It is clear these issues

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still exist today in NYC Schools, but there is a new wave of advocacy being led by students.

#### THE NEW WAVE OF ADVOCACY

For supporters of integration, the apparent solutions often lead to thoughts of massive busing programs, controlled choice admissions, and magnet schools. These initiatives primarily represent a focus on enrollment or desegregation policies. Youth advocates who have analyzed the mechanics of NYC educational segregation have aligned themselves with a broad racial justice framework for integration.<sup>9</sup> This framework, premised on the youth advocacy organization IntegrateNYC’s 5 R’s of *Real Integration*, which prioritizes enrollment policies, while equally considering a broader range of reforms around policy and practice. The 5 R’s presents a theory of action that insists the enrollment work begins by dismantling the structural barriers to access that facilitate concentrations of privilege and vulnerability. This means eliminating exclusionary admissions policies such as screens and rethinking the use of programs such as Gifted and Talented. It also means working towards district-wide and then borough-wide enrollment policies that facilitate mobility and equitable parent choice, disrupting gerrymandered community school districts.

We have already seen these priorities play out, whether it be at some of the

individual schools such as Castle Bridge Elementary, Star Academy, Harvest Collegiate, Park Slope Collegiate, and in the district-wide plans such as the Diversity in Admissions plan for Community School District (CSD) 1, and Community School District 15 Middle School Diversity Plan, which eliminates all screens from middle schools. Each of these plans builds equitable enrollment policies, while making deep investments in inclusive practices and culturally responsive education.

The SDAG’s report aligns with this student-designed framework and offers many practical steps to move in the right direction. The initial report falls short of calling for specific admissions policy changes, but a follow-up report commits to more specificity on these matters.

The movement for integration has grown significantly over the past few years and planning a role in this work has been the privilege of a lifetime. The work is by no means complete, but we are on the path forward.

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