How families from gentrifying neighborhoods can help break the cycle of school segregation

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Those who traditionally attend racially similar schools tend to seek out a similar environment for their own children, a trend which can reinforce school segregation. **Genevieve Siegel-Hawley**, **Stefani Thachik** *and* **Kim Bridges** *has studied families in a gentrifying neighborhood, and finds that many who came from privileged backgrounds wished to send their own children to public schools and to invest in them in order to demonstrate their commitment to the neighborhood.*

As cities across the US experience unprecedented demographic shifts, new opportunities emerge for integrating urban schools. Yet crucial challenges persist, even when school stakeholders have an equity and inclusion focus. In a recent study, we explored the experiences and impacts of a largely white group of parents committed to investing in and reforming—through the establishment of a whole-school International Baccalaureate program—their gentrifying neighborhood's elementary school.

For our study, we interviewed 14 families and stakeholders (parents and community leaders) in a demographically-changing, mid-sized southern city to understand how participants' experiences influenced what they wanted for their students' school.   We found that families who seek to improve their children's schools faced a number of challenges, including difficulties working with school staff and leadership, and a degree of isolation from other parents.

We analyzed these interviews through the lens of two important desegregation theories. Gordon Allport's intergroup contact theory, outlined in a 1954 book *The Nature of Prejudice*, suggested four conditions to ensure that contact between different groups reduced prejudice: equal status among members, cooperative work, common goals and strong leadership support. Perpetuation theory suggests that segregation has an intergenerational effect—such that attending a racially similar school environment as a child makes one more likely to seek out similar settings for offspring. The seminal, 1990s-era study illuminating perpetuation theory, by Amy Stuart Wells and Robert Crain, examined the effects of school desegregation on the choices of black students with regard to colleges, workplaces and neighborhoods.

Our interviews revealed a variety of promising pre-conditions for the transition from a high poverty, racially- and economically-segregated neighborhood school to one of racial and socioeconomic diversity: a group of families intentionally seeking out and using their nearby school, a faith-based calling to community values and social justice, an attention to systemic and historical issues of race and class, and a desire to avoid neighborhood and school gentrification that would negatively impact equity. The reinvesting parents (parents who were interested in making their children's school better), guided by school- and district-level leadership, pursued an equitable school reform solution for all students. They also chose not to pursue a charter school model, which could have exacerbated segregation.

The reinvestment process also faced key challenges. Interviewees revealed anxieties noted in both national and international studies, including tensions between their values and their concerns for their children's educational and development experiences, the need for a support system of similarly-situated families, and a push to cluster their own students with teachers identified as acceptable within their own social group. Many of the initial reinvesting families came from privileged backgrounds and did not experience diverse school experiences themselves, contradicting perpetuation theory. In this case, participants' own exclusive school backgrounds helped shape their choice to live, send their children to public school, and interact with diverse families in a very different urban context.

Even though these parents broke the perpetuating cycle of segregation, their relative unfamiliarity with cross-racial relationships may have contributed to the challenges that arose.

Interviewees also noted the failure to cooperate on a long term basis with the principal and the perception of a lack of supportive leadership from her. Expectations of differential treatment for the children of the initial group (e.g., assignment to a teacher of the parents'—not the leader's—choosing), as well as the principal's acquiescence to those requests, put the principal in an awkward position and produced unequal status between existing and reinvesting families. These dynamics contradict Allport's conditions of shared goals and equal status among different groups.

Our findings also yielded little evidence of extensive contact between the new parents and existing parents in the school. Multiple participants from the initial group of reinvesting parents expressed a strong desire to "be heard" and a realization that they could employ their collective power and resources to effect change. But these newer parents often contrasted their actions with those of current parents, whom they described as disempowered or lacking the capacity to effect change. Most of the new parents noted either satisfaction with the school from existing parents (and thus a lack of shared reform goals) or empathy with current parents' inability to be present in the school. As a result of these observations, they worked primarily with staff and the principal rather than existing school families.

Our study shows the importance of leadership, resources, and policy to support integration efforts in rapidly shifting school environments. Policies that encourage more systemic societal integration for younger children—inclusionary zoning or voluntary school integration plans that reach across city-suburban lines, for instance—would provide important early experiences navigating racial and socioeconomic divisions. In essence, more wide scale opportunities for children of all backgrounds to meaningfully come into contact with different groups–before stereotypes and misunderstandings harden–could alleviate the need for extensive adult training in such skills. The USDOE's Equity Assistance Centers provide technical assistance for establishing such policies, but many district and regional leaders don't know this resource is available.

Stakeholders need to keep key conditions in mind, including equal status (e.g., eliminating racial and economic disparities in classroom assignments, gifted identification, parent-teacher organizations, etc.) and common goals. Principals must have the capacity and opportunity to broaden the leadership skills that may have brought success in a high poverty environment. Schools in diversifying areas should seek out staff who can act as cultural brokers and who can ensure Allport's four conditions for positive intergroup contact. Targeted training also can help leaders, staff, and parents adapt to changing conditions and varied parental expectations without sacrificing the needs of existing families and students. During the desegregation era, a relatively small federal grant called the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA) provided training funds for school personnel working with and teaching diverse student populations. Given the shifts occurring in metropolitan schools today, a similar, but greatly expanded, effort seems essential.

As systems, teachers, principals and families navigate the rapid demographic transformations taking place in urban schools across the country, positive intent, hard work, and commitment to equity are a great start, but they are not sufficient. Urban school stakeholders need support to leverage the strengths of their increasing diversity to create integrated settings with inter-generational benefits.

This article is based on the paper, 'Reform With Reinvestment Values and Tensions in Gentrifying Urban Schools', in Education and Urban Society.

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