

Education Practice and the McKinsey Institute for Black Economic Mobility

# Advancing racial equity in US pre-K–12 education

Six actions could help close racial gaps in US pre-K–12 academic achievement.

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**There is a significant opportunity** to increase inclusive growth in America by closing persistent racial gaps in educational opportunities and achievement. Eliminating these gaps could help reverse downward trends in social mobility while potentially generating up to \$700 billion in additional GDP for the nation.<sup>1</sup> And there are resources available to jump-start initiatives. The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) allocated \$190 billion in federal funding to the nation's schools, from prekindergarten (pre-K) to 12th grade—a resource pool that could be used to advance racial-equity investments in education. But the clock is ticking: the funds must be obligated by September 2024.<sup>2</sup>

Based on detailed reviews of research and case studies, we have identified six actions that leaders of school systems and their communities could take to use the remaining ESSER funding to advance racial equity in education (exhibit).<sup>3</sup> While this list is not exhaustive, these select areas include those in which students of color may have less access, lower quality, or fewer resources. Some of these solutions may not be novel, but our experience has shown that consistent implementation of these actions, and implementation at scale, has been a challenge thus far.

To be clear, these actions, even if taken at scale, may not eliminate racial disparities in pre-K–12

<sup>1</sup> McKinsey analysis has estimated that had the Black and Hispanic student-achievement gap been closed in 2009, the US GDP in 2019 would have been \$426 billion to \$705 billion higher. For more, see Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, "COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime," McKinsey, June 1, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> "Halftime for the K–12 stimulus: How are districts faring?," McKinsey, November 2, 2022; ESSER received funds under three COVID-19 relief packages passed by Congress: the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act; the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act; and the American Rescue Plan. For more, see "Monitoring and reporting," Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, last updated June 14, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> We use the term "school systems" throughout this article to refer to both districts and charters because we believe that many of these proposed interventions are important for a full community of schools to consider together, regardless of governance.

## Exhibit

### Six actions could advance racial equity.

#### Actions systems can control directly



Strengthening core  
early-literacy instructional  
practices



Using an equity framework to  
allocate resources



Increasing instructional time  
for students who need it the  
most

#### Actions that require broad community leadership



Ensuring access to  
high-quality prekindergarten



Providing wraparound  
services for families and  
communities



Addressing school racial,  
ethnic, and economic  
divisions

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education. However, evidence suggests that these investments could help shift current trajectories for education opportunities and outcomes, generating meaningful advances in equity.<sup>4</sup>

## The persistent opportunity and achievement gap

The opportunity gap in public education between White students and students of color has persisted throughout our nation's history. When free public education began to spread in the early 19th century, children of color were often excluded. When they did gain access, they were often segregated and underserved.<sup>5</sup> Forced segregation was permissible until the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954, and despite decades of court-ordered desegregation that followed, 98

percent of Black children in the South still attended segregated schools in 1964.<sup>6</sup> And children of color were often forced to attend segregated schools with a focus on assimilation.<sup>7</sup>

Through the 1970s and '80s, racial inequities in academic outcomes were closing, but there is still a long way to go. At the pace of change before the COVID-19 pandemic, it would take an estimated 60 to 160 years for students of color to achieve educational parity in the United States (see sidebar "Racial gaps in educational outcomes over time").<sup>8</sup> And the pandemic, which wiped out two decades' worth of math and reading progress for the nation's fourth and eighth graders, exacerbated existing gaps.<sup>9</sup> Declines in National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) math scores were much larger for Black students than for their White peers.

<sup>4</sup> Many other interventions with rigorous evaluation have improved student outcomes (such as extracurriculars and changes to discipline systems), but in this article, we focus on those with evidence of successful interventions at scale.

<sup>5</sup> "History and evolution of public education in the US," Center on Education Policy, 2020; Colette Coleman, "How literacy became a powerful weapon in the fight to end slavery," History.com, January 29, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> "Brown v. Board of Education (1954)," National Archives, last updated November 22, 2021; Clayborne Carson, "Two cheers for Brown v. Board of Education," *Journal of American History*, June 2004, Volume 91, Number 1.

<sup>7</sup> "San Francisco Public Schools deny admission to Chinese-American children," Equal Justice Initiative, accessed June 27, 2023; "Cultural genocide' and Native American children," Equal Justice Initiative, September 1, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> McKinsey analysis of "Racial and ethnic achievement gaps," Education Opportunity Monitoring Project, Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Mervosh, "The pandemic erased two decades of progress in math and reading," *New York Times*, September 1, 2022; "COVID-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning," McKinsey, July 27, 2021.

## Racial gaps in educational outcomes over time

Since the 1970s, progress has been made to narrow racial inequities in outcomes in all grades in math and reading.<sup>1</sup> National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) scores show that on average, scores of Hispanic and Black students rose significantly relative to other student groups in the '70s and early '80s, and that Black or Hispanic children were roughly three years ahead of their parents' generation in math and two to three years ahead in reading.<sup>2</sup> Over a similar time period, high school attainment levels rose steadily for Black students.<sup>3</sup>

However, meaningful progress in accelerating outcomes for students of color has stalled, leaving large gaps of roughly 0.6 to 0.8 standard deviations compared with White students.<sup>4</sup> Black students' test scores are, on average, around 2.0 grade levels lower than those of White students within the same districts, and the difference between Hispanic and White students' average test scores in the same district is about 1.5 grades.<sup>5</sup> These gaps emerge early in children's lives: White kindergartners have higher math and reading skills than Black and Hispanic

kindergartners as they enter school,<sup>6</sup> and this discrepancy persists, leaving Black and Hispanic students with high school graduation rates four to six percentage points below the national average.<sup>7</sup>

While some states have made progress in increasing educational equity for students of color, most states only closed the gap by about 0.05 to 0.10 standard deviations between 2003 and 2012,<sup>8</sup> suggesting that it would have taken 60 to 160 years for the nation to achieve education parity for students of color at prepandemic rates.

## Racial gaps in educational outcomes over time (continued)

Moreover, because of the effects of the pandemic, those gaps have widened (exhibit).<sup>9</sup> In majority-Black schools,

students are five months behind their historical levels in both math and reading, on average. Meanwhile, students in

majority-White schools are just two months behind their historical levels.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Racial and ethnic achievement gaps," Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project, Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis, 2015; Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick, "Demographic change and democratic education," in Susan Fuhrman and Marvin Lazerson, eds., *The Public Schools*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, January 2006.

<sup>2</sup> "Racial and ethnic achievement gaps," 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Cheeseman Day, "Black high school attainment nearly on par with national average: 88% of Blacks have a high school diploma, 26% a bachelor's degree," US Census Bureau, June 10, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hansen et al., "Have we made progress on achievement gaps? Looking at evidence from the new NAEP results," Brookings Institution, April 17, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Rabinovitz, "Local education inequities across U.S. revealed in new Stanford data set," Stanford Graduate School of Education, April 29, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Daphna Bassok and Susanna Loeb, "Early childhood and the achievement gap," in Helen F. Ladd and Edward B. Fiske, eds., *Handbook of Research in Education Finance and Policy*, Milton Park, UK: Routledge Press, November 2007; Christine M.T. Pitts and Megan Kuhfeld, "Mind the kinder-gap: New data on children's math and reading skills as they enter kindergarten," Kappan, September 21, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> "Public high school graduation rates," National Center for Education Statistics, last updated May 2023.

<sup>8</sup> "Racial and ethnic achievement gaps," 2015; "Have we made progress on achievement gaps?," April 17, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, "COVID-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning," McKinsey, July 27, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, "COVID-19 and education: An emerging K-shaped recovery," McKinsey, December 14, 2021.

### Exhibit

## Fourth-grade math scores fell for all groups from 2019 to 2022, but this change was more pronounced for students of color.

### NAEP<sup>1</sup> 4th-grade mathematics scores by racial group, 2019–22

Subgroup	2019 average score	2022 average score <sup>2</sup>	Change
American Indian and Alaska Native	227	221	▼ 6
Asian	263	259	▼ 4
Black	224	217	▼ 7
Hispanic	231	224	▼ 7
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	226	224	▼ 2
Two or more races	244	239	▼ 5
White	249	246	▼ 3
All students	241	236	▼ 5

Note: On the NAEP, 1 point is roughly equivalent to 3 weeks of learning, so the largest NAEP declines above represent ~20 or more weeks of lost learning, which is more than half of a school year.

<sup>1</sup>National Assessment of Education Progress.

<sup>2</sup>All 2022 average scores, excluding the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander score, are statistically significantly different ( $p < 0.05$ ) from their respective 2019 scores.

Source: "Largest score declines in NAEP mathematics at grades 4 and 8 since initial assessments in 1990," NAEP, 2022

# While strong literacy instruction benefits all students, it could have an outsize impact on closing racial gaps. Struggling readers are disproportionately students of color.

These developments, and the availability of federal funding to combat pandemic-related learning delays, offer an opportunity for action.

## Three actions school systems can take directly

Below are three actions school systems can control directly to help close equity gaps, as well as steps they could take to jump-start initiatives.

### 1. Strengthen core early-literacy instructional practices

Early literacy is closely linked to student success. Students who do not read proficiently by third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school.<sup>10</sup> While strong literacy instruction

benefits all students, it could have an outsize impact on closing racial gaps. Struggling readers are disproportionately students of color; for example, of the one million fourth graders who do not read at a proficient level, two-thirds are Black or Hispanic.<sup>11</sup>

Research on tens of thousands of children and adults summarized by the National Center on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) provides a road map to potentially reduce the rate of reading failure from three in ten children to one in ten.<sup>12</sup> This road map includes a strong phonics curriculum and intervention, paired with vocabulary and background knowledge gleaned from broad exposure to varied content.<sup>13</sup> School systems have achieved significant growth in early-literacy results by implementing research-backed actions.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Double jeopardy: How third grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, January 1, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> *Teacher prep review: Program performance in early reading instruction*, National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), January 2020 (a count by the NCTQ of students who scored "below basic" on the reading assessment in 2019).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Narrowing the third-grade reading gap*, EAB, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



Starting in 2013, Mississippi passed a series of state laws that overhauled the state's approach to teaching reading, aligning it with research-backed literacy practices. Between 2017 and 2019, it was the only state to see fourth-grade literacy gains on the NAEP, with Black students' scores improving at a faster pace than those of their White peers.<sup>15</sup> Other states are now following a similar strategy: in 2021, Louisiana proposed investments and passed legislation focused on early literacy, and in 2020, Tennessee passed legislation focused on foundational literacy skills.<sup>16</sup>

**Getting started.** ESSER investments can help jump-start efforts to strengthen approaches to early-literacy instruction. To ensure those funds deliver maximum impact, system leaders could start by assessing the degree to which current literacy practices are backed by research. This could lead to curricular changes, new approaches to professional development, or other adjustments that could strengthen literacy instruction for students of color. States could also consider taking on a stronger role in overseeing teacher prep programs, which are currently largely outside their purview; requiring professional development that is aligned with curriculums and research; and publishing standards for state-approved curriculums and assessments.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Use an equity framework to allocate resources

Resources such as staff, time, and money are limited and often concentrated on students from wealthier (usually White) families.<sup>18</sup> Nationally, historically underserved students receive between \$400 and \$1,200 less per pupil than White and economically advantaged students.<sup>19</sup> Students of color are also more likely to attend schools with newer, less experienced, lower-paid teachers, who are less effective than more-experienced teachers, on average.<sup>20</sup>

Multiple case studies suggest that when resources are targeted at low-income students and students of color, achievement gaps narrow.<sup>21</sup> For example, a \$1,000 increase in per-pupil funding over four years was found to boost college attendance rates by about three percentage points and graduation rates for lower-income students by nearly two percentage points.<sup>22</sup>

Research also suggests that students assigned to higher-quality teachers are more likely to graduate, attend college, and earn higher wages.<sup>23</sup> Given that school systems across the country are currently struggling to attract and retain K–12 teachers,<sup>24</sup> states could allocate ESSER funds to strategically address teacher shortages in

<sup>15</sup> Liana Loewus, "National reading scores are down. What does it mean?," *Education Week*, October 30, 2019; Tim Abram and Kymyona Burk, "#AskExcelinEd: What is the state of Black education in Mississippi?," *ExcelinEd*, April 14, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> "Louisiana governor Edwards signs big and bold early literacy legislation," *ExcelinEd*, June 23, 2021; Marta W. Aldrich, "Literacy bill on the move in Tennessee Legislature, minus the phrase 'science of reading,'" *Chalkbeat Tennessee*, March 10, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> As of June 2023, 31 states and Washington, DC, have passed laws or implemented policies focused on the science of reading. Eighteen mention teacher prep, and 16 address teacher certification or license renewal. For more, see Sarah Schwartz, "Which states have passed 'science of reading' laws? What's in them?," *Education Week*, May 9, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> \$23 billion, EdBuild, February 2019; Dan Goldhaber and Michael Hansen, "National board certification and teachers' career path: Does NBPTS certification influence how long teachers remain in the profession and where they teach?," *Education Finance and Policy*, 2009, Volume 4, Number 3; Charles T. Clotfelter, Helen F. Ladd, and Jacob Vigdor, "Who teaches whom? Race and the distribution of novice teachers," *Economics of Education Review*, August 2005, Volume 24, Number 4.

<sup>19</sup> Hojung Lee, Kenneth A. Shores, and Elinor Williams, *The distribution of school resources in the United States: A comparative analysis across levels of governance, student sub-groups, and educational resources*, Annenberg Institute at Brown University working paper, number 21-443, July 2021; dollar figures have been adjusted for geographic cost differences.

<sup>20</sup> Kristin Blagg, Julien Lafortune, and Tomás Monarrez, *Measuring differences in school-level spending for various student groups*, Urban Institute, October 2022.

<sup>21</sup> For examples, see Emily Rauscher, *Delayed benefits: Effect of California school district bond elections on achievement by socioeconomic status*, Annenberg Institute at Brown University working paper, number 19-18, May 2019; Carolyn Abbott et al., *School district operational spending and student outcomes: Evidence from tax elections in seven states*, Annenberg Institute at Brown University working paper, number 19-25, January 2020; Geoff Marietta, *Lessons for preK-3rd from Montgomery County Public Schools*, Foundation for Child Development, December 2010; Stacey M. Childress, Denis P. Doyle, and David A. Thomas, *Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in Montgomery County Public Schools*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, July 2009; Matt Barnum, "As pandemic aid runs out, America is set to return to a broken school funding system," *Chalkbeat*, August 25, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Accounting for district-level differences in the cost of hiring teachers; see C. Kirabo Jackson and Claire Mackevicius, *The distribution of school spending impacts*, National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) working paper, NBER Working Paper Series, number 28517, February 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, and Jonah E. Rockoff, "Measuring the impacts of teachers II: Teacher value-added and student outcomes in adulthood," *American Economic Review*, September 2014, Volume 104, Number 9.

<sup>24</sup> Jake Bryant, Samvitha Ram, Doug Scott, and Claire Williams, "K–12 teachers are quitting. What would make them stay?," *McKinsey*, March 2, 2023.

hard-to-staff schools by using pay incentives. The NCTQ has identified 66 districts across the United States that are doing this.<sup>25</sup> In assessing teacher staffing across districts, schools systems could also consider the diversity of their teaching staff. Research has shown that same-race teachers have a notable positive effect on the performance of students of color, including documented improvements in student achievement,<sup>26</sup> school attendance,<sup>27</sup> student self-management,<sup>28</sup> course grades,<sup>29</sup> high school graduation,<sup>30</sup> and reduced disciplinary actions.<sup>31</sup>

**Getting started.** System leaders could start by assessing whether resources are allocated with equity of opportunity in mind. This includes examining the distribution of the most effective staff, the impact of instructional and operational vacancies, facilities equity, per-pupil spend, and shared central resources. An equity framework could inform conversations about the best ways to allocate high-quality teachers and leaders to schools where they can have the greatest impact as well as other strategies to shift resources to ensure equity of opportunity.

### 3. Increase instructional time for students who need it the most

Research indicates tutoring can have a significant impact on student learning at scale,<sup>32</sup> making it a potentially effective approach for combating pandemic-related learning loss to advance racial

equity in education. A study by the University of Chicago found that individualized, intensive (“high dosage”) tutoring could more than double the amount of math students learned in a single academic year.<sup>33</sup>

School systems can explore many tutoring programs, such as Saga Education, Reading Partners, and the Minnesota Math Corps.<sup>34</sup> As school systems work to establish these programs, state leaders could also help by providing dedicated funding and technical assistance. For example, Tennessee recently launched TN All Corps, a program designed to provide funding and support to systems running high-dosage, low-ratio tutoring programs, and more than half the districts in the state are participating.<sup>35</sup>

**Getting started.** ESSER resources provide an opportunity to increase instructional time for students of color who need additional support. State leaders could consider replicating efforts like Tennessee’s to provide incentives for and build momentum around high-dosage tutoring.

### Three actions that require broad community leadership

Advancing racial equity in education also means addressing factors that are outside of school systems’ direct control. To help close gaps in education opportunity and outcomes, community

<sup>25</sup> Patricia Saenz-Armstrong, “How are school districts using strategic pay to attract and retain teachers where they need them?,” NCTQ, September 8, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Anna J. Egalite, Brian Kisida, and Marcus A. Winters, “Representation in the classroom: The effect of own-race teachers on student achievement,” *Economics of Education Review*, April 2015, Volume 45.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Gottfried, J. Jacob Kirksey, and Tina L. Fletcher, “Do high school students with a same-race teacher attend class more often?,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, March 2022, Volume 44, Number 1.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Cleveland and Ethan Scherer, *The effects of teacher-student demographic matching on social-emotional learning*, Annenberg Institute at Brown University working paper, number 21-399, February 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Erica Harbatkin, “Does student-teacher race match affect course grades?,” *Economics of Education Review*, April 2021, Volume 81.

<sup>30</sup> Seth Gershenson et al., “The long-run impacts of same-race teachers,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, November 2022, Volume 14, Number 4.

<sup>31</sup> Constance Lindsay, Grace Luetmer, and Tomás Monarrez, *The effects of teacher diversity on Hispanic student achievement in Texas*, Urban Institute, January 11, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew A. Kraft et al., “Accelerating student learning with high-dosage tutoring,” Annenberg Institute at Brown University, February 2021.

<sup>33</sup> High-dosage tutoring consisted of daily 45- to 50-minute two-on-one math instruction for ninth and tenth graders; Monica P. Bhatt, *Not too late: Improving academic outcomes among adolescents*, University of Chicago Education Lab working paper, NBER Working Paper Series, number 28531, March 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Accelerating student learning with high-dosage tutoring,” February 2021.

<sup>35</sup> “TDOE announces 79 districts intend to participate in TN ALL Corps tutoring, serve nearly 150,000 students over three years,” Tennessee Department of Education, September 30, 2021.

leaders could take the following three actions in partnership with school system leaders.

### **1. Ensure access to high-quality pre-K**

Research shows that children enrolled in pre-K programs typically go on to achieve higher test scores and better language development. Often, they also have better attendance and fewer behavioral problems in school.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the positive effects of pre-K are often larger for students of color, particularly Hispanic students and those from low-income households.<sup>37</sup> Research suggests that attending a high-quality pre-K program can close as much as 50 percent of the racial achievement gap.<sup>38</sup>

But racial disparities exist today in both enrollment and access to high-quality programming.<sup>39</sup> To reduce these gaps, school systems could consider investing in high-quality pre-K and ensuring access for children of color.<sup>40</sup>

**How school system leaders can support community pre-K efforts.** School systems could convene state and local leaders, district and charter leaders, childcare providers, parents, advocates, workforce partners, and others to develop a road map to expand high-quality pre-K with a focus on racial equity. And if doing so requires a new revenue source, the assembled stakeholders could

help build a coalition to identify potential funding mechanisms. Some states and localities have used short-term federal funds to pilot expanded pre-K programs, though other funding sources will likely be needed to ensure long-term sustainability.

### **2. Provide wraparound services for families and communities**

Factors that affect long-term outcomes for youth, such as stable affordable housing and exposure to traumatic events, are beyond the direct control of the school system. Children who have experienced a single adverse childhood experience earn 7.3 percent less than their peers and are more likely to depend on public benefits and live in poverty.<sup>41</sup> Wraparound healthcare, social services, and other supports are thus considered critical complements to a strong school. This is particularly important for students of color. McKinsey research has found that many Black neighborhoods are consumer deserts, with inadequate access to food, affordable housing, healthcare services, broadband, and banks.<sup>42</sup>

Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) provides an example of what can be achieved by combining strong schools with effective community support. Educator Geoffrey Canada created HCZ in 1997 to address challenges children in Harlem were facing through what HCZ calls "cradle-to-career services" centered on education,<sup>43</sup> including parent workshops, full-day

<sup>36</sup> Craig S. Gordon, Gary T. Henry, and Dana K. Rickman, "Early education policy alternatives: Comparing quality and outcomes of Head Start and state prekindergarten," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 2006, Volume 28, Number 1.

<sup>37</sup> Margaret R. Burchinal et al., "Puzzling it out: The current state of scientific knowledge on pre-kindergarten effects," Brookings Institution, April 17, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> W. Steven Barnett et al., "Meta-analysis of the effects of early education interventions on cognitive and social development," *Teachers College Record*, March 2010, Volume 11, Number 3.

<sup>39</sup> While 43 percent of White three- and four-year-olds were enrolled in either public or private preschool in 2020, only 33 percent of Hispanic children were enrolled. And Black and Hispanic preschool students are more likely to have lower-quality classroom experiences and early-childhood teachers with lower skills. For more, see "Enrollment rates of young children," NCES, last updated May 2023; American Community Survey 2010–19 data, US Census Bureau; and Jonathan T. Rothwell, "Classroom inequality and the cognitive race gap: Evidence from 4-year-olds in public preK," Social Science Research Network, March 2, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Jake Bryant, Emmy Liss, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, "Expanding publicly funded pre-K: How to do it and do it well," McKinsey, January 13, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Examples of adverse childhood experiences include violence, abuse, or exposure to substance use problems; Stefanie Schurer and Kristian Trajkovski, *Understanding the mechanisms through which adverse childhood experiences affect lifetime economic outcomes*, IZA Institute of Labor Economics working paper, Discussion Paper Series, number 11450, April 2018.

<sup>42</sup> "The economic state of Black America: What is and what could be," McKinsey, June 17, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> "History of Harlem Children's Zone," Harlem Children's Zone, accessed June 28, 2023.



preschool, health clinics, youth violence prevention efforts, and college admissions support. HCZ played a central role in connecting services across schools, local government, and community organizations. HCZ's work was credited with eliminating gaps in outcomes between students of color and White students in both literacy and math.<sup>44</sup>

Numerous efforts have been made to replicate HCZ's success, including through the Obama administration's Promise Neighborhoods initiative. Launched in 2010, the initiative has awarded grants to 17 cities, but results have been mixed—an outcome some researchers say highlights the difficulty of measuring success and shows how varied needs can be from one community to another.<sup>45</sup> In Buffalo, the Say Yes to Education program saw graduation rates climb 15 points from 2012 (the starting year of operations) to 2017. The program includes the promise of free college tuition for graduates and provides a full suite of wraparound services for students. Leaders highlight cooperation from local government, schools, the teachers' union, parents, business groups, and higher education as instrumental to Buffalo's success.<sup>46</sup>

The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) in Boston is another example of a neighborhood collaborative that has supported community-led initiatives to increase affordable housing and strengthen community infrastructure.<sup>47</sup> HCZ, the Say Yes program, and DSNI have relied on

partnerships with a broad base of funders that have made long-term commitments.

***How school systems can support wraparound services and support.*** School systems with large populations of students of color living in neighborhoods that are consumer deserts could begin by identifying a leader who can build a community and school system coalition organized around long-term collaborative commitments to strengthen the community. As the coalition builds momentum, its focus could turn to ensuring sufficient funding over the long term.

### **3. Address school racial, ethnic, and economic divisions**

Longitudinal studies of court-ordered desegregation in the 1950s and 1960s found that five years in an integrated school environment translated into a 14.5-percentage-point increase in the likelihood of Black students graduating from high school.<sup>48</sup> More recently, an analysis of NAEP results showed that low-income students in high-poverty schools were about two years of learning behind low-income students attending more-affluent schools.<sup>49</sup> And it's not just historically marginalized students who benefit from attending more-affluent schools (which tend to have a higher proportion of White students than low-income schools do): students of all races and socioeconomic statuses show improvements in critical thinking, motivation, creativity, and problem-solving skills in socioeconomically diverse classrooms.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Will Dobbie and Roland G. Fryer, Jr., "Are high-quality schools enough to increase achievement among the poor? Evidence from the Harlem Children's Zone," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, July 2011, Volume 3, Number 3.

<sup>45</sup> The need for a long-term horizon is just one of the reasons identified for the mixed results; this work is transformational and requires significant shifts across the community. Another reason is funding: the economic recession beginning in 2008 meant that the Promise Neighborhoods program was funded at far lower levels than intended. For the HCZ, Geoffrey Canada played the role of the link among schools, local government, and community organizations. Civic leaders stepping into a leadership role to connect these components of a community is critical for successful replication. For more, see Amadou Diallo, "As Harlem Children's Zone moves to export its model nationwide, other city programs offer cautionary tales," *Washington Post*, December 21, 2020; and Amanda Erickson, "Why hasn't the Harlem Children's Zone been replicated even without Obama's help?," *Bloomberg*, August 16, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Amadou Diallo, "Buffalo shows turnaround of urban schools is possible, but it takes a lot more than just money," *Hechinger Report*, July 18, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Lee Allen Dwyer, *Mapping impact: An analysis of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative land trust*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, June 2015; "Boston Promise Initiative at Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative," Promise Neighborhoods Institute, 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Rucker C. Johnson, *Long-run impacts of school desegregation & school quality on adult attainments*, National Bureau Economic Research (NBER) Working Paper Series, number 16664, January 2011.

<sup>49</sup> "The benefits of socioeconomically and racially integrated schools and classrooms," Century Foundation, April 29, 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

Yet nearly 70 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the nation's schools remain divided along racial, ethnic, and economic lines, despite student populations becoming increasingly diverse.<sup>51</sup> For instance, one in six US public-school students attends a school where more than 90 percent of students share that student's racial identity.<sup>52</sup> The US Government Accountability Office found that there are 13,500 predominantly same-race schools within ten miles of a predominantly same-race school of a different race.<sup>53</sup>

Some schools and communities around the country are trying to address this issue by focusing on socioeconomic integration.<sup>54</sup> The Century Foundation estimates that more than 900

districts have some form of integration policy in place today.<sup>55</sup> Across these efforts, successful approaches have had support and investment from both district leadership and the broader community to help guide efforts as they evolve over time.

In Dallas and San Antonio, school district leaders worked with communities to identify new school models that would be compelling to parents across all socioeconomic groups, such as science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) programs; dual-language schools; and advanced-learning opportunities.<sup>56</sup> These new schools are diverse by design—when they opened, slots were prioritized for students from different socioeconomic groups.<sup>57</sup> Initial results suggest these schools have

<sup>51</sup> According to Merriam-Webster, segregation is defined as “the separation or isolation of a race, class, or ethnic group by enforced or voluntary residence in a restricted area, by barriers to social intercourse, by separate educational facilities, or by other discriminatory means.”

<sup>52</sup> Halley Potter, *School segregation in U.S. metro areas*, Century Foundation, May 17, 2022.

<sup>53</sup> *K-12 education: Student population has significantly diversified, but many schools remain divided along racial, ethnic, and economic lines*, US Government Accountability Office, June 2022.

<sup>54</sup> This has potentially been a strategic pivot after multiple voluntary racial-integration efforts were dismantled by the Supreme Court in the early 2000s; Richard D. Kahlenberg, *A bold agenda for school integration*, Century Foundation, April 8, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> “School integration is popular. We can make it more so,” Century Foundation, June 3, 2021; Richard D. Kahlenberg, *School integration in practice: Lessons from nine districts*, Century Foundation, October 14, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> For Dallas, see Carole Learned-Miller, *Dallas Independent School District: Integration as innovation*, Century Foundation, October 14, 2016; for San Antonio, see Beth Hawkins, “78207: America’s most radical school integration experiment,” *The 74*, September 25, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> *Dallas Independent School District*, October 14, 2016.

## Case studies in socioeconomic integration

**Across the United States**, school systems and communities are focusing on socioeconomics in an effort to diversify schools. Case studies of Dallas, San Antonio, and New York City show a variety of ways to address the issue.

### Dallas, Texas

In Dallas, racial segregation and concentrated poverty have traditionally gone hand in hand, limiting resources and supports for schools in communities of color.<sup>1</sup> Starting in 2014, the city opened some new schools and transformed others to include options that families indicated would be more appealing. The city put new admissions policies in place

at these new schools, reserving half of the slots for students from one of the city's economically disadvantaged communities and half for students from more-affluent communities. Transportation was provided to mitigate barriers to attendance.<sup>2</sup>

Examples are emerging of newer schools that are far more representative of Dallas's overall population, both racially and socioeconomically, than the average Dallas public school.<sup>3</sup> But the benefits extend beyond just school composition: the “diverse by design” schools have stronger student attendance and teacher retention than average and are increasingly popular with families.<sup>4</sup>

### San Antonio, Texas

In San Antonio, the lowest-performing schools were often located in the city's highest-poverty communities. When city leaders first considered how to better support the most vulnerable students, they started with granular data analysis, mapping indicators of poverty on a block-by-block basis. Using this data, leaders sorted students into four socioeconomic groups (called “blocks”) based on the level of disadvantage they were facing. Then, as the district opened new schools in 2017 with attractive magnet programs, leaders intentionally set aside seats for students from all four blocks, particularly focusing on the students in Block Four—those with the greatest economic hurdles.<sup>5</sup>

more-representative student bodies and bring positive academic benefits to students.<sup>58</sup>

In New York City's District 15, a community school district encompassing affluent brownstone Brooklyn and lower-income and immigrant enclaves, a community-driven process led to a controlled-choice admissions plan for middle school. Since its

launch in 2018, this plan has decreased economic and racial segregation (see sidebar "Case studies in socioeconomic integration"),<sup>59</sup>

**How school systems can support integration efforts.** The path forward for socioeconomic integration—and racial integration by proxy—often depends on local context and requires a long-term

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.; Mohammed Choudhury, "It's still possible to take action on school segregation. Here's how we're doing it in San Antonio," *Chalkbeat*, August 1, 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Daniel Dench, Shirin Hashim, and Jesse Margolis, *The impact of middle school integration efforts on segregation in two New York City districts*, MarGrady Research, July 2020.

## Case studies in socioeconomic integration (continued)

San Antonio paired the rollout of its integration program with an initiative to bring strong educators to historically low-performing schools. With these two efforts combined, the number of students in schools deemed failing by the state dropped by 400 percent, and in 2018, San Antonio was considered the fastest-improving school system in Texas.<sup>6</sup>

### New York City's District 15

New York City's District 15 served a socioeconomically and racially diverse population within a relatively contiguous geographic area, but in very segregated schools. For years, community leaders and elected officials pushed for action on integration.<sup>7</sup> A formal planning process

finally kicked off in 2017, endorsed by the district but led by a working group of community members and supported by an external facilitator.<sup>8</sup> Parents were invited to weigh in at public workshops and given meaningful support to participate, including real-time translation, travel vouchers, childcare, and food.

Under the plan the working group developed, which was then ratified by the New York City Department of Education, academic screening for middle school admissions in District 15 was eliminated, and all schools set aside more than half of seats for historically disadvantaged students. The working group also advocated for additional resources to

ensure schools would be equitable and inclusive, including training for staff, changes to curriculums, and restorative-justice practices.<sup>9</sup>

The new policy was implemented in 2018. By July 2020, economic segregation in sixth grade had decreased by 55 percent, while racial segregation decreased by 38 percent.<sup>10</sup> In the first year of the program, there was no discernable White flight; in fact, the overall racial composition of the district remained the same.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kate Rix, "How Dallas is reversing decades of white flight from its school system," *Guardian*, August 4, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Carole Learned-Miller, *Dallas Independent School District: Integration as innovation*, Century Foundation, October 14, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "How Dallas is reversing decades of white flight from its school systems," August 4, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Beth Hawkins, "78207: America's most radical school integration experiment," *The 74*, September 25, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; Mohammed Choudhury, "It's still possible to take action on school segregation. Here's how we're doing it in San Antonio," *Chalkbeat*, August 1, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Abigail Savitch-Lew, "Ambitious Brooklyn school desegregation plan stirs excitement, faces hurdles," *CityLimits*, July 9, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> From the D15 Diversity Plan.

<sup>9</sup> "Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Carranza announce District 15 middle school diversity plan and launch \$2M school diversity grant program," City of New York, September 20, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Dench, Shirin Hashim, and Jesse Margolis, *The impact of middle school integration efforts on segregation in two New York City districts*, MarGrady Research, July 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Nyah Berg, Brad Lander, and David Tipson, "The white flight that wasn't: New data reveal that Brooklyn school integration is working," *New York Daily News*, November 14, 2019.

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vision for implementation. System leaders could start by studying the enrollment and demographic patterns in their community to understand the challenge and the opportunity. They could then partner with local groups to understand what kind of change families might support and listen to perspectives from all stakeholders to build a coalition for change. Districts could use federal funds to spur planning and engagement efforts, which often require real resources to be successful and inclusive.

community energy around addressing pandemic recovery and the resources provided by ESSER represent a unique opportunity for school system leaders to address racial inequities. To seize that opportunity, leaders could consider translating a vision for equity into meaningful actions such as the six described here, with broader community commitment for long-term initiatives.

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The lack of meaningful progress in closing racial disparities in pre-K–12 educational outcomes, and the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on learning for students of color, suggests that policy makers need to think differently about how to close these gaps. At the same time, collective

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