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COMMENTARY

High School Socioeconomic Segregation and Student Attainment

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PUBLISHED: November 5, 2013

The impact of school socioeconomic segregation on educational equity has been documented by research dating back to 1966, when the Coleman Report found that the socioeconomic composition (SEC) of a school's student body had the strongest association with student achievement of any school factor. Since then, a substantial body of research has accumulated, mostly supporting Coleman's findings on student achievement. In comparison, very little research has examined the effects of school segregation on student attainment outcomes, such as high school graduation and college enrollment. This gap in the research literature is particularly noteworthy because attainment is associated with many important life outcomes such as economic prosperity, health, and participation in society. My recent study in the *American Educational Research Journal* begins to address this gap.

I used a nationally representative sample of 10th graders from theEducation Longitudinal Study of 2002 to examine the association between high school socioeconomic segregation and student attainment, as well as the mechanisms that mediate those associations. The results show that socioeconomic segregation in schools has a strong association with high school graduation and college enrollment. Controlling for an array of student and school factors, students who attend high SEC schools are 68 percent more likely to enroll in a 4-year college than students who attend low SEC schools (Note: SEC is a composite measure of parental education, occupational status, and family income. High and low SEC schools are those with a school-average SEC at least one standard deviation above or below, respectively, the sample mean). The results suggest that the association between SEC and attainment is due primarily to two school-based mechanisms.

First and most prominent is peer influence. Classmates and friends at school transmit social norms, educational values, and even academic skills, which in turn influence other students' attitudes and behaviors, ultimately affecting their attainment. These peer influences tend to be negative in low SEC schools and positive in high SEC schools. Second, school practices that emphasize academics also play a significant role, particularly in mediating the relationship between school socioeconomic segregation and 4-year college enrollment. On face value, this finding suggests that altering school practices at low SEC schools is a viable remedy for the negative consequences of SEC segregation. Unfortunately, low SEC schools are often beset by student disorder and disciplinary problems, which can be traced to the demographic composition of the student body. Managing this disorder may require compromising academics because, to some degree, ramping up academics may be met with frustration and resistance that increases disorder, suspension, and dropout. However, some increase in academic emphasis will likely have a positive impact on attainment if coupled with appropriate social supports.

Together, these findings suggest that addressing the effects of SEC on attainment will likely require altering the student body at

schools so that no school becomes an incubator of the negative consequences of concentrated poverty. Because of the prevalence of neighborhood segregation, this will require resolving structural barriers to integration created by school catchments and municipal boundaries. Resolving these structural barriers will create flexibility for integrating schools. However, short of permanent large-scale busing, which is both costly and lacking public support, school integration will require neighborhood integration. Successful economic and public interventions often incentivize behaviors rather than force them. Given the past failures of forced busing, this approach is likely the best bet for integrating schools, with incentives for states, municipalities, and citizens to embrace short- and long-term integration plans.

The full study can be found in Palardy, G.J. (2013). High school socioeconomic segregation and student attainment. American Educational Research Journal, 50, 714-754.

Suggested citation

Palardy, G. J. (2013, November). *High school socioeconomic segregation and student attainment* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/high-school-socioeconomic-segregation-and-student-attainment

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