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A Regional Approach to School Diversity: The Possibility, Feasibility, and Desirability

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Abstract

The growing opportunity and achievement gaps between and within school divisions in the Richmond, Virginia area are a concern of late. Educational experts and researchers attribute these disparities in part to factors such as less-qualified teachers, poor curricula, and inferior school facilities that are linked to racially and socioeconomically isolated schools. To help reverse the widening student opportunity and achievement gaps that are related to economic and racial isolation, there is a need to explore ways to advance educational equity and excellence in Richmond area schools.

Keywords: racial and economically isolated schools; poverty and schools; educational apartheid; closing the achievement gap; educational outcomes of Black students; economic diversity and court cases

The purpose of this study was to explore the possibility, feasibility, and desirability of a regional middle school in the metropolitan Richmond area with an emphasis on racial and economic diversity. The following research questions were investigated:

1. What are the national trends and solutions to address issues of racial and economic isolation?
2. What are the federal, state, and/or local legislation impacting the creation of a regional middle school?
3. What are the potential funding sources available to create a regional middle school?

4. Is there regional support to create a regional middle school?

Four case studies are presented which characterize commonly used voluntary school integration plans or student assignment methods employed by school districts to avoid racial and socioeconomic isolation and to promote diversity. A survey, disseminated to three regional advocacy groups, revealed overwhelming support for a regional middle school with a focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) and an emphasis on diversity. Implications of the study suggest that the creation of a single school may have a limited impact on the region, but it is an important first step that could lead to the development of a replicable model to scale up across the region.

Background and Context

In June of 2013, the Richmond Public School Board voted unanimously (9-0) to move forward with plans for a massive overhaul of attendance zones, requiring more than 2,000 Richmond elementary school students to be reassigned to new schools for the next school year. Many in the community, including leaders of the Richmond NAACP and Crusade for Voters, viewed that decision as a step backward in the effort to promote school desegregation (Reid, 2013a). A local advocacy group, Richmond Coalition for Quality Education, led by former City Councilman Marty Jewell, backed a lawsuit filed with the Richmond Circuit Court against the School Board (Reid, 2013b). During a School Board meeting, after the rezoning vote, Mr. Jewel voiced concerns of the group, and many in the community, that the Board's school rezoning decision was impulsive and uninformed. The Board argued, however, that the attendance zone changes were part of a larger plan to consolidate schools, reduce overcrowding, and achieve cost savings (Bourne & Gray, 2013).

Other local and regional advocates who were pushing for more school diversity weighed in on the matter as well. They also disagreed with the Board's rezoning decision—which did not publically consider the racial composition implications of rezoning—and suggested the rezoning changes undermined the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision to desegregate schools. Moreover, advocates argued, resegregation of schools does nothing to equip students for a global society. Dr. Siegel-Hawley, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University and an expert on school racial patterns, warned the Board that their rezoning changes threatened to reverse what little racial diversity progress that has been made (Lazarus, 2013). The rezoning vote by the Richmond School Board shone a spotlight on a national concern of resegregation happening in public schools across the nation, but was of particular concern to local researchers who felt compelled to take action.

Problem of Practice

A Brief Historical Overview of School Segregation

Black Americans were socially and legally separated from Whites during the 1800s and beyond. They were remanded to racially segregated churches, hospitals, neighborhoods, movie theaters, restaurants, and schools. The isolation

of Black children in educational institutions across the United States was intractable until the 1950s. Major progress was made through the courts to desegregate schools. However, de facto segregation persisted even after federal mandates required states to integrate schools “with all deliberate speed” (Siegel-Hawley, Ayscue, Kucsera, & Orfield, 2013, p. 2).

Landmark legislation began to pave the way for the rationale of school diversity long before its benefits were realized. In the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the court ruled that the “separate but equal” doctrine—a cornerstone argument for Jim Crow segregationists—was unconstitutional. During the next decade, and despite community demands for more to be done to fully integrate schools, efforts to dismantle segregated school systems met great resistance, particularly in the South (Bhargava, Frankenberg, & Le, 2008). It was not until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that any meaningful school desegregation efforts began. From the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, the U.S. Department of Justice was empowered to initiate desegregation lawsuits against school districts still practicing segregation. To insure compliance, it withheld federal funds from non-complying school districts as leverage (Bhargava et al., 2008).

A number of important Supreme Court rulings were handed down during this period which gave legitimacy and valuable support to desegregation efforts including: *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968); *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971); and *Keyes v. School District No. 1* (1973). However, during the 1990s, the Supreme Court stepped in again and shifted the debate on school desegregation jurisprudence. In three important decisions, *Oklahoma City Board of Education v. Dowell* (1991), *Freeman v. Pitts* (1992), and *Missouri v. Jenkins* (1995), the Court effectively permitted federal courts to declare a school system “unitary,” allowing them to no longer be subject to a court order to desegregate (Bhargava et al., 2008, p. 8).

Segregation is once again in full bloom in American public schools. The decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) enacted 60 years ago, which declared unlawful the doctrine of “separate but equal,” has been rolled back according to numerous reports from the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Siegel-Hawley, Ayscue, Kucsera, and Orfield (2013) contend that racially and economically isolated schools have short and long-term negative consequences that severely limit student success in school and society. A racially isolated school is considered intensely segregated when less than 10% of the student population is non-Black or non-Latina/o; similarly, a school is considered to be an apartheid school when less than 1% of the student population is non-Black or non-Latina/o (Siegel-Hawley, Ayscue, et al., 2013). Several factors contribute to lower educational outcomes and opportunities in racially and economically isolated schools, including fewer qualified teachers, higher teacher turnover, inferior facilities, and higher dropout rates (Bankston & Caldas, 1996).

Theoretical and Conceptual Underpinnings

This section briefly examines the literature relevant to issues surrounding racially and economically isolated schools. Specifically, it explores the impact of racial and economic segregation on the educational and social outcomes for African Americans, Latina/o, and White youth from historical, social, political, and cultural perspectives. By corollary, a look at the benefits of racially and economically diverse schools will follow. In the next section, a detailed narrative traces how these issues have impacted the Richmond metropolitan area historically to present day. In the final sections, a study design is revealed which explains how the researchers evaluated the possibility and feasibility of a regional solution to creating diverse learning environments, and explores the political context and economic levers that are necessary for it to exist.

Issues surrounding racially and economically isolated schools. The impact of race and socioeconomic status on academic achievement is a perennial social justice issue with well-documented long-term consequences (Fram, Miller-Cribbs, & Horn, 2007). The seminal report, *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which was released in 1983, propelled the nation into an accountability driven reform movement resulting in state mandated standardized testing (United States, 1983). According to Ravitch (2010), “our national educational system ended up with no curricular goals, low standards, and dumbed-down tests” (p. 23). Public schools with high-poverty and high Black and Latina/o populations struggle to meet state mandated benchmarks. Longitudinal studies indicate that African American and Latina/o students consistently score lower on literacy tests than White students (Li & Hasan, 2010).

Racially and economically isolated schools produce inequitable conditions that severely limit educational opportunities and outcomes for non-White students. This is particularly true for Blacks and Latinos who are further marginalized when they attend schools that are racially and economically segregated (Caldas & Bankston, 1998). Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg (2012) contend that these isolated schools are often associated with a variety of educational harms including fewer qualified teachers, higher rates of student discipline issues, increased student mobility, over-identification of students with special needs, and high drop-out and lower graduation rates. Siegel-Hawley, Bridges, Shields, Moeser, and Hill (2013) further suggest these harmful factors have an immediate and long-term impact on a student’s ability to succeed in school and later in life.

Benefits of racially and economically diverse schools. Over time, as a better perspective and understanding of the harmful effects of racially and economically isolated schools have become more apparent, further evidence in the research reveals benefits associated with integrated schools. Diversity in schools is an important aspect of student learning and well-roundedness; a diverse student body can help prepare children of all races for citizenship in an increasingly multicultural society. Holmes (2004) contends that children of all races and ethnicities become better learners, develop more positive attitudes

toward other races, and are better prepared to live and work in a diverse society and workforce.

Years of research on the topic of school diversity reveals three basic benefits or outcomes for children who attend racially and economically integrated schools, which include: (a) short-term learning outcomes such as improved academic performance and higher student aspirations; (b) long-term educational and occupational outcomes such as college attendance and career attainment; and (c) social outcomes such as improved racial attitudes and relations, and citizenship (Bhargava et al., 2008; Caldas & Bankston, 1998; Holmes, 2004; Palardy, 2013; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Tefera, Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Chirichigno, 2011).

The United States is becoming a more diverse nation, and according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), the U.S. is projected to become a majority-minority nation for the first time in 2043. As our nation continues to move toward an increasingly multicultural society, our students will need to develop skills necessary to better understand, live, and effectively work with others of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. An integrated, structured educational setting produces immediate educational and lasting social, political, and economic benefits to society (Bhargava et al., 2008).

A Trend of Resegregation in Metropolitan Richmond

Issues of racial segregation have long plagued the Richmond metropolitan area. A myriad of historical events have made Richmond City the epicenter of poor Black neighborhoods in the region, and they include: (a) racially restricted post-WWII suburban growth; (b) slum clearance and redevelopment projects; and (c) discriminatory practices in real estate and banking which ultimately led to the proliferation of Black and mixed-raced neighborhoods (Siegel-Hawley, Bridges, Shields, Moeser, & Hill, 2013). As the city became predominantly Black and the immediate suburban counties became overwhelmingly White, so did the demographic composition of their respective schools.

The U.S. Supreme Court case, *Bradley v. School Board of Richmond* (1973), effectively ended the U.S. District Court-ordered merger of Richmond City schools and the counties of Henrico and Chesterfield. The impact of that decision still reverberates 40 years later. Today, the student enrollment of Richmond Public Schools profiles a less than ten percent white population, while Henrico has achieved—and Chesterfield is quickly approaching—a majority-minority school division status, where the total student body is comprised of more minority students than non-Hispanic whites (Virginia Department of Education, 2014).

By 2010, racial diversity experienced by the surrounding suburban school divisions was attributed to an influx of Black students, which accounted for over one third of the student enrollment; at the same time, more than one third of the Black students in the Richmond area attended intensely segregated schools (Ryan, 2010; Siegel-Hawley, Ayscue, et al., 2013). It was also noted that the number of

students attending intensely segregated schools in Richmond City was much higher than other major metro regions in Virginia. That number was twice as high as in Norfolk, Virginia Beach, and Newport News, and five times as high as in Northern Virginia (Siegel-Hawley, Ayscue, et al., 2013).

Purpose of Study

This moment in time presents an important juncture—a second opportunity of sorts—for leaders and advocates in the Richmond metropolitan area to reverse the momentum of resegregation and to advance educational equality for the next generation of students. To help reverse the widening student opportunity and achievement gaps that are related to economic and racial isolation, there is a need to explore ways to advance educational equity and excellence in metropolitan Richmond schools. One proposed solution is to create a regional middle school designed to provide equal educational opportunities within and across jurisdictions. The purpose of this study was to explore the possibility, feasibility, and desirability of a regional school that addresses the ills of racial and socioeconomic isolation, while promoting diverse learning environments for schools in the metropolitan Richmond area.

Study Design

This study involved a Transformative Participatory Approach to explore stakeholder voices related to the topic of racial and economic diversity in the Richmond area to evaluate the possibility, feasibility, and desirability of a regional middle school serving the metropolitan Richmond area. This participatory approach, in other words, compelled the researchers to interact with stakeholders in the region with the goal of promoting social change that benefits marginalized groups (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). This social justice methodology focuses on responsive interaction between stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, parents, students, and community members seeking institutional change. This study was comprised of an embedded mixed methods design where data from the first phase of the study were used to inform the second phase of the study.

Phase One

Phase One of the study addressed research questions one through three, which evaluated the “possibility” and “feasibility” aspects of the study. This phase of the study was designed to ascertain the most relevant issues associated with racial and socioeconomic segregation and benefits of diverse learning environments; it highlighted strategies currently employed by school districts across the nation to reduce racial and socioeconomic isolation and to promote diversity in public schools; and it identified federal, state and local legislation (and potential funding sources) that could ease a path for, or pose a barrier to, the creation of a regional school in the Richmond metropolitan area.

First, to gain an understanding of pertinent issues surrounding school segregation and the advantages of school diversity, the researchers drew upon a collection of primary and secondary resources with an emphasis on social science research, including scholarly articles and journals. These resources provided a

synthesis of existing government documents, relevant court cases, federal and state legislation, as well as authoritative books on the topic of school segregation and diversity.

Research shows that one of the major problems of 21st century education is the impact of racially and economically isolated schools on our society. This pressing issue results in a lack of intercultural cohesiveness; a racially and ethnically imbalanced teaching corps; high teacher attrition rates in school divisions with heavy concentrations of poverty; inadequate curricula to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students; and unacceptable disparities in resources (e.g., infrastructure and technology) (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012; Sharma, Joyner, & Osment, 2014). Attending a school with a diverse student population can, on the other hand, significantly enhance academic achievement and intercultural competency (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2007).

Next, a case study analysis of four school districts within this phase helped to spotlight national trends in what was possible (and viable) to combat racial and socioeconomic segregation in schools. These case studies represented suitable models to illustrate voluntary school integration plans or student assignment methods used by school districts to promote school diversity, and exemplified a broad appeal of various alternative approaches used in our nation's schools. The four case studies included: Denver Schools of Science and Technology, which uses a weighted-lottery system to admit students to its 14 STEM-based charter schools (DSSST Public Schools, 2014); Omaha Public Schools, which utilizes a combination of open enrollment and theme-focused magnet schools to allow students to attend their neighborhood schools or apply to magnet schools within their attendance zones (Learning Community, 2014); Connecticut Interdistrict Magnet School Program, which has a lottery system to admit students to interdistrict magnet schools (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2014); and San Francisco Unified School District, which uses open enrollment and an Educational Placement Center to assign students to the school of their choice in or outside of their attendance zone (San Francisco Unified School District, 2014). The case studies revealed that educational solutions must be catered directly to the school district and community. One city's solution is not necessarily applicable to all cities with similar educational issues.

Finally, the latter section of Phase One attempted to peel back some of the layers of education policy and funding in the context of the creation of a regional middle school in the Richmond area. Here, the researchers probed whether or not the creation of a regional middle school is feasible under Virginia laws, and if so, what type of school is suitable and what funding sources are available. A careful examination of Virginia education policy and legislation revealed an existing framework for the creation of a regional school, and disclosed that four public school choices offer a viable path for a potential regional school focused on diversity. These school choices include charter, magnet, Governor's, and college partnership laboratory schools.

Table 1 is a comparison matrix developed by the researchers to narrow this list of public school choices to one school option that is most likely to

facilitate the creation of diverse learning environments in the region. The matrix compares each of the four school choices against twelve designs, elements, or attributes. The selected attributes (singularly or in combination) have been effective tools used by school districts to voluntarily desegregate their schools and to attract a more diverse student body. For example, a school that possesses a special program or instructional focus (attribute 2) will attract different families and increase the diversity of the student population within a school (Driver, 2010). Similarly, Frankenberg and Orfield (2007) argued that a school championing diverse learning opportunities (attribute 6) provides specific experiences that allow students of different races and ethnicities to learn with and from students of different backgrounds.

After the appropriate school attributes were selected, the researchers employed a rating system to assess the value of each school choice. A high (“advantage”), low (“disadvantage”), or “neutral” value rating was assigned based

Table 1. Comparison Matrix for Virginia Regional School Options

Regional School Criteria	Charter Schools	Magnet Schools	Governor Schools	Laboratory Schools
School Structure Attributes				
1. A framework for regional cooperation	Advantage	Advantage	Advantage	Advantage
2. Possess a program focus or specialty	Neutral	Advantage	Advantage	Neutral
3. Possess an equitable student enrollment policy or process aligned with a diversity plan	Neutral	Advantage ^a	Disadvantage	Neutral
4. Has a curriculum that encourages cultural and interaction	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral
5. School goals embedded with diversity	Disadvantage	Advantage ^a	Disadvantage	Neutral
6. Provide professional development or diverse learning opportunities (DLOs)	Disadvantage	Neutral	Disadvantage	Neutral
7. No restrictive screening or competitive admissions	Advantage	Advantage	Disadvantage	Advantage
8. Utilizes an outreach communication plan	Neutral	Advantage ^a	Disadvantage	Neutral
9. Provides transportation services to all families	Disadvantage	Advantage ^a	Disadvantage	Neutral
10. A regional (or otherwise) governing body	Advantage	Advantage	Advantage	Advantage
School Funding Attributes				
11. Reliable funding sources for startup	Advantage	Advantage	Advantage	Advantage
12. Reliable funding sources for sustained operations	Advantage	Neutral	Advantage	Neutral

^aRequired for and tied to Magnet School Assistance Program (MSAP) grant funding.

upon the school's capacity to incorporate an attribute within the framework of its current school policies and procedures, Virginia laws, and existing funding channels. An "advantage" rating was assigned when a school choice was likely to possess, or had the potential to possess, an attribute without changing existing laws or school policies to do so. A "disadvantage" rating value was assigned if a change in current legislation or school policies was required to incorporate a particular attribute. A "neutral" rating was assigned when incorporating an attribute was a design option decision left to school organizers or when there was not enough data to support assigning a high or low rating value.

The comparison matrix reveals the most viable choice for a regional middle school promoting diversity is a public magnet school. Nine out of the twelve attributes were assigned an "advantage" value rating under this school choice option, almost twice the cumulative "advantage" value rating of the next closest option—charter schools. One reason a charter school is not an ideal choice for a regional middle school focused on diversity is that charter school laws in Virginia (as well as other states) do not contain provisions to enforce diversity as part of school operations (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2009). Governor's schools are a relatively worse choice than charter schools when compared to attributes of the diversity of student enrollment, competitive admissions, and outreach to attract a diverse pool of applicants.

College partnership laboratory schools are not a viable option for a regional school focused on diversity primarily because they are a relatively new school choice in Virginia and no longitudinal data exists to support their effectiveness. Magnet schools are notable for their ability to draw students from across neighborhood attendance zones and school division boundaries; they typically possess a special program, curriculum, or theme; and their historical focus on school integration and civil rights protections (e.g., overt diversity goals, transportation for all students, and outreach to diverse families) were factors contributing to the favorable attribute ratings (Driver, 2010).

Funding for magnet schools, however, presents both an opportunity and challenge for school organizers and potential governing boards. While federal Magnet School Assistance Program (MSAP) grants are typically a great source for magnet school startup funding and help to ensure school organizers make diversity more explicit in school operations, total reliance upon MSAP grants for long-term use could prove to be problematic. Federal magnet grant funding is awarded on a competitive basis and on a three-year cycle (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). A regional magnet school with a governing body consisting of stakeholders from across the region could offer a more sustainable funding source. Within this structure, cooperating school divisions would provide per-pupil or a proportional share of funding based upon the number of students that are enrolled from their respective school divisions. In addition to federal grant revenues, and the potential for shared funding, magnet schools have no restrictions to receive private or public donations, partnerships, or fundraising dollars (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Magnet schools possess all of the critical elements or attributes the

researchers believe are necessary to create diverse learning environments. With its original goal to balance school enrollment across racial lines, and the many options for school funding, magnet schools are the most viable choice for a regional school that promotes diversity.

Phase Two

The insights and understandings gained from the first phase of the study helped to inform and guide the development of a survey instrument that comprised the second phase, or the “desirability” (research question 4) aspect of the study. A simple descriptive survey was administered to 824 individuals from three comparative regional groups in the Richmond area. They included participants from the Looking Back, Moving Forward (LBMF) conference; parents from regional school localities and members of the regional Parent Teacher Association group (PTA); and participants from the Bridging Richmond Middle School Summit (Bridging Richmond).

LBMF is comprised of national and local researchers, educational practitioners, policy makers, community and corporate members, and students. The LBMF participants were chosen because they are considered to be advocates for, and show an interest in, exploring ways to advance educational equity and excellence in Richmond metropolitan area schools. The Bridging Richmond group was included because they represent a group seeking solutions for middle schools, a primary objective of this research study. Specifically, this group is comprised of regional school leaders and other stakeholders associated with the Bridging Richmond Middle School Summits held in Richmond. The attendees included scholars, policy makers, educators, and citizens seeking solutions and best practices for addressing academic, behavioral, and social challenges at the middle school level in public schools in the region. These participants have pertinent knowledge and understanding of issues surrounding middle school students, and were more likely to offer effective solutions and best practices to improving student achievement at that level.

These participant groups represent various education stakeholders in the Richmond area and nationally, and provide a diverse perspective on the impact of diversity on student and school success, the type of regional school and program desired, and the willingness for regional cooperation in the creation of a regional school. Two hundred and fifty people from these groups responded (30.3% response rate) and the data were analyzed according to the following themes: (a) perceptions of school diversity, (b) perceptions of regional support, (c) preferences for school type and program focus, and (d) perceived obstacles to regional cooperation.

Summary of key survey findings. The survey revealed that the majority of respondents indicated they would support the creation of a regional school focused on diversity by a two to one margin. Over 80% of respondents indicated they would sign a petition in support of a regional school. Of the respondents with school age children, 60% would send their own children to such a school. Fifty-two people took the time to respond to a question asking for additional ways

they would like to support a regional school. Popular responses included offers to teach, volunteer, or be part of a planning committee. There was a particular interest in STEM education among those responses.

In attempting to gauge respondents' perceptions of obstacles to creating a regional school, respondents indicated that political and financial obstacles were the greatest to overcome in the creation of a regional middle school. This held true across the various demographic subgroups (i.e., race, locality, or group [Bridging Richmond, LBMF, or PTA]). In order for a regional school focused on diversity to come to fruition, it is going to take political will and a financial commitment by the entire region.

In addition to understanding perceptions of the importance of diversity to students' success, the researchers attempted to gauge the region's perception of support for a regional school. Over 90% of respondents indicated that they would support the creation of a regional school. A follow-up question asked how the respondents felt the people they associate with would feel about this type of school, and the positive response rate decreased only slightly to 80%. This is going to be a key factor in the success of a regional effort because residents without school age children and individuals who are not engaged in the education process have influence over city and county elected officials as well. Regional school organizers will want to emphasize the regional benefits of a better educated, more diverse student body. The potential positive economic impact could certainly influence fiscally conscious citizens who commented that they do not want to see their tax dollars cross jurisdictions.

The region has a positive outlook on diversity in schools, which is an important starting point for regional dialogue. Respondents indicated that diversity is important, but the majority of respondents indicated that diversity is more important for students' social development than their academic success. This is contrary to what research indicates and will need to be emphasized in the community outreach that would accompany the creation of a regional school (Bhargava et al., 2008; Holmes, 2004; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Organizers of a regional school will want to emphasize the economic and social benefits of having great schools throughout metropolitan Richmond. They will also want to emphasize that many of the proposed options for a school come with built-in state and federal funding, especially during the initial startup phase.

The research clearly indicates that all students benefit from diverse learning opportunities (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2007). When the economic and political roots of de facto apartheid education are severed, the public will no longer accept the disenfranchisement of Black and Brown students, predictably ranked on the bottom of standardized test measures. The creation of a regional middle school with an emphasis on diversity can positively impact student achievement and serve as a model for best practices in the development of intercultural competence among students, teachers, and administrators. The researchers understand that the creation of a single school may have limited impact on the region, but it is an important first step that could lead to the development of a replicable model to scale up across the region.

Survey limitations. The following limitations of the study are noted: (a) the survey population of the study garnered 250 responses but was non-random, so the findings are not necessarily generalized to the metropolitan Richmond area population; (b) survey participant perceptions were based on subjective self-reporting; and (c) the use of an online survey instrument may have presented technical challenges for some participants. Despite these limitations, this survey offers significant insight into regional perspectives and perceptions of school diversity, the level of support and desired structure for a regional school, and obstacles to regional cooperation.

Determined Impact on Policy and Practice

This study proposes a school that values diversity and should have specific curricula and experiences that build students' social cognition, which is the ability to effectively interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Quality teachers who create high expectations for all students can provide the greatest constructive outcome for lasting positive social development (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). As teachers have a profound influence on student achievement, cultural diversity training can help teacher education programs develop culturally competent educators to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of students of color in American public schools.

To counteract the adverse effects of intensely segregated schools requires "a comprehensive school-wide commitment to eliminating prejudice and increasing intercultural competence" (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2007, p. 33). When the financial and political power of regional stakeholders coalesces around the creation of a regional magnet school, the traumatic effects of racially and economically segregated schools can be transformed into an educational model where "school-level policies and practices make diverse schools and classrooms more effective than any other schools" (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2007, p. 32).

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers recommend that regional stakeholders collaborate and move forward with the creation of a regional magnet school at the middle school level. Furthermore, the region should take advantage of funding available in the 2016 MSAP grant cycle. With regional support for one or a series of schools with a program focus (e.g., STEM, Arts, etc.) and an emphasis on diversity, Richmond is poised to be a model for school districts around the country facing similar educational issues. This study shows that the creation of a regional middle school with a program focus and an emphasis on diversity is possible, feasible, and desirable.

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