

Three recent studies highlight the potential of America's older suburbs to achieve King's dream of integration

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While still perceived by many as homogeneous, mostly middle class and white, American suburbs today are increasingly diverse, both racially and economically. Although the suburbs developed, in major part, under the overtly exclusionary policies of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, lower income and minority families have been migrating to the suburbs in growing numbers in recent decades. However, as lower-wealth families of color have moved from city centers to inner suburbs, many white and higher-wealth families have repeated the same pattern of flight that lead to the formation of segregated areas in our central cities. Due to these patterns of migration, poverty has spread from urban centers into inner suburbs, replicating problems with housing and school segregation and inequality.

The suburbs of today are on the leading (or receding) edge of racial integration in housing and schools, and represent an opportunity for America to make the great strides towards an integrated society that eluded activists during the previous civil rights era. Whether these communities resegregate or successfully integrate depends on how they address the reality of changing demographics in housing and schools. A new book, *The Resegregation of Suburban Schools: A Hidden Crisis in American Education*, edited by Gary Orfield and Erica Frankenberg (Harvard Education Press, 2012), and two new national policy studies, *America's Racially Diverse Suburbs: Opportunities and Challenges*, by Myron Orfield and Thomas Luce (Institute for Metropolitan Opportunity, July 2012), and *Integrating Suburban Schools: How to Benefit from Growing Diversity and Avoid Segregation*, by Adai Tefera, Erica Frankenberg, Genevive Sigel-Hawley, and Gina Chirichingo (The Civil Rights Project, May 2011), highlight issues surrounding the transformation of suburban demographics, and provide insight into how policy can intervene to promote successful, stable integration.

In *The Resegregation of Suburban Schools*, Orfield and Frankenberg identify major and recurring problems facing suburban communities and school districts with shifting racial and socioeconomic demographics. Chief among the problems identified is the lack of foresight shown by suburban communities in anticipating and dealing with demographic change.

In its examination of the Osseo Area school district near Minneapolis, *The Resegregation of Suburban Schools* provides a compelling example of the dangers faced by suburbs in transition. Brooklyn Park, a suburb in the eastern section of the Osseo Area school

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districts, was one of the first communities in the region to exhibit the effects of resegregation in suburbia, transitioning from integrated schools to a cluster of segregated schools. Meanwhile, in the primarily white communities on the western side of the district, attitudes regarding the racial changes in the district ranged from denial of such changes to resistance towards them. At the time of the book's writing, twelve out of a possible twenty-seven schools in the Osseo Area district were "racially isolated" under state guidelines, meaning students of color at any one school exceed the district's average by at least 20 percent.

An interview with district-level staff member Greg Howard of the Osseo Area school district reveals the difficulties of a school district adjusting to unanticipated demographic change. According to Howard, "[h]ad we been able to manage [the demographic shift] in a different way so the differences [in school populations] weren't so extreme, then the changes ... would have been much easier. People would have accepted the programs."² As things stand in Osseo, Howard states, "the rapid change and localization of the change has made it very, very difficult for the district to manage."³

Despite the widespread trend of resegregation, some suburban communities have managed to maintain the quality of their schools while becoming economically and racially diverse. An examination of Oak Park, a Chicago suburb, in *The Resegregation of Suburban Schools*, provides a potential model for suburban communities looking toward integration to emulate. In the late 1960s, Oak Park faced the threat of major racial transition, beset on all sides by increasing resegregation. However, rather than accept the change as inevitable, the community of Oak Park took a proactive approach to change and mobilized a comprehensive and effective campaign against resegregation.

Oak Park residents employed a wide range of strategies to combat resegregation, investing in consensus-building for government action, engaging with businesses and religious institutions, bringing in public-relations personnel, and quickly addressing any signs of deterioration in housing along the community's eastern borders closest to Chicago. Oak Park addressed issues in housing to avoid over-concentration of poverty and focused local funds in areas where disinvestment may have occurred. The Oak Park Housing Center was created to ensure a stable mix of racial and economic diversity among residents, and the community itself actively monitored behavior of real estate agents, even going so far as to pursue prosecution and revoke agents' licenses in cases of residential steering. In order to keep up confidence regarding housing value, the community of Oak Park even offered insurance to protect values. Furthermore, "with a small number of schools and the ability to create new attendance areas," schools were not permitted to resegregate, but no major plan was necessary due to the overall success of the integrated housing strategy.⁴ One important parting lesson from the study of Oak Park is the need to maintain community focus on issues like segregation; when communities age and new residents move in, hard-won victories like diverse schools and integrated housing can be taken for granted, and can deteriorate, eventually falling back into segregation.

² *The Resegregation of Suburban Schools: A Hidden Crisis in American Education*, 2012 (Gary Orfield & Erica Frankenberg, eds.) at 128.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.* at 191.

Sustained integration in suburban communities requires considerable and continuing effort on the part of the communities themselves. A study of three decades of data included in *America's Racially Diverse Suburbs*, from the University of Minnesota's Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity, reveals that integrated neighborhoods, even those with only a modest percentage of minority residents, are extremely vulnerable to change over time. For instance, a neighborhood with a population consisting of more than 23 percent minority residents in 1980 was more likely to become a resegregated neighborhood by 2005 than to remain integrated. This kind of demographic instability can have wide-ranging impacts on neighborhood health and school quality, and should be a primary concern for residents of these areas.

The authors of the Minnesota study find that, in heavily segregated areas, “students are much more likely to spend time behind bars than to go on to higher education or find living wage employment.”⁵ Banks become hesitant to lend when areas resegregate, so businesses struggle and economic conditions decline even during periods of national growth. Both “[p]roperty values and tax capacity decline as needs for services intensify,” and then tax rates rise and services decline as the city taxes lower-valued real estate at higher rates.⁶ Eventually, “[b]usinesses and individuals with economic choices choose not to locate there, and as conditions worsen, existing businesses and individuals leave.”⁷

Stable, racially and socioeconomically integrated communities are in the best interests of all suburban residents, especially with regard to property value and school quality. Fortunately, it seems that suburban residents of integrated communities could themselves play a key role in preserving the integrity of their communities, but only if they act before resegregation takes hold.

The authors of *America's Racially Diverse Suburbs* also stress that racially integrated suburbs tend to contain an even mix of Democrats and Republicans, and can become battleground areas in political contests. “If racially diverse suburbs can become politically organized and exercise the power in their numbers,” the authors suggest, “they can ensure both the stability of their communities and the future opportunity and prosperity of a multi-racial metropolitan America.”⁸

The UCLA Civil Rights Project's 2011 report and toolkit, *Integrating Suburban Schools: How to Benefit from Growing Diversity and Avoid Segregation*, which preceded Orfield and Frankenberg's new book, provides an impressive guide for the promotion of racial diversity in suburban schools. The study notes that integrated schools provide benefits to both minority and white students, where minority students show improved rates of

⁵ *America's Racially Diverse Suburbs: Opportunities and Challenges*, p. 4. Available at http://www.law.umn.edu/uploads/e0/65/e065d82a1c1da0bfef7d86172ec5391e/Diverse_Suburbs_FINAL.pdf.

⁶ Id.

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id. at p. 3.

achievement, and white students experience long-term social benefits including, but not limited to, “a reduction in racial stereotypes and greater racial understanding.”⁹

Integrating Suburban Schools identifies transportation as a “critical tool to helping districts create integrated schools.”¹⁰ Additionally, the authors highlight the possibility of intra-district plans within existing school district boundaries to promote integration, including both zoning and school choice as possible tools. The use of larger geographic school zones can be used to distribute students evenly along lines of race and class, while smaller zones can be used to target geographically confined populations and assign them to particular schools to promote integration.

Magnet schools can also present real possibilities for inter-district integration in the suburbs, due in part to their ability to draw students from different districts. Magnet schools are the largest set of choice-based schools in the nation, and according to the authors, magnet schools located on the border between city and suburban school systems could provide to students many of the benefits stemming from increased diversity discussed above.

The resegregation of suburban communities presents a serious social problem, while at the same time presenting an extraordinary opportunity to achieve sustained integration. As demonstrated by the discussion of Oak Park in *The Resegregation of Suburban Schools*, communities that nurture the necessary political will can lay groundwork for sustained integration that will support the integrity of their communities for decades to come. However, even with a proactive political response to integration, residents and activists must remain aware of continually shifting demographic trends due to the unstable nature of integrated neighborhoods, as illustrated in *America’s Racially Diverse Suburbs*. Finally, communities have a variety of approaches which can be taken to promote diversity in schools (where it has a profound effect on students), including, but not limited to, free transportation, redrawing of school district lines, and school choice programs which encourage diverse student bodies. To avoid the powerful “social engineering” forces that drive resegregation, communities must remain vigilant and intentional in politics, research, and policy over an extended time frame – which requires strong local civil society institutions as well as a long term commitment by state and local government.

⁹ *Integrating Suburban Schools: How to Benefit from Growing Diversity and Avoid Segregation*, p. 4. Available at <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/integrating-suburban-schools-how-to-benefit-from-growing-diversity-and-avoid-segregation/tefera-suburban-manual-2011.pdf>. (*Integrating Suburban Schools* also notes that desegregation programs have little or no negative effect on white students’ test scores, especially where whites make up the majority of the student body).

¹⁰ Id. at p. 18.