Today’s Desegregation: Not Your Father’s Busing

School integration programs have been in place for decades, but the topic has gained renewed attention as part of the 2020 presidential election campaigns.

Like St. Louis’ Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corp., school integration programs — often known by the shorthand terms “busing” or “deseg” — have evolved over the years. Some programs have moved from mandatory court-ordered systems to voluntary initiatives. Some have ended due to population shifts that led to more integrated communities. Some are changing their selection criteria.

Current Progress and Trends

“The school integration movement seems to be alive and well,” said Philip Tegeler, of the Poverty and Race Research Action Council, in an introduction to a 2019 report by the National Coalition on School Diversity (NCSD). “The support we received from the Obama administration energized and empowered the movement in a way that cannot be undone. The same growing grassroots constituency that gave federal leaders the support they needed to act has had the baton handed back to them, and they will not be silenced.”

Contemporary integration programs use several different processes to achieve diversity and address current legal and social issues. Some lessons taken from recent research projects, noted by VICC’s Chief Executive Officer David Glaser, include:

• To achieve racial and socioeconomic diversity, districts should consider combining both race and socioeconomic status in their selection criteria, as selection based solely upon race of individual students may have legal implications today. Some programs use the racial composition of neighborhoods vs. that of individual students to alleviate legal concerns.
• To increase urban district engagement, seek state funding to replace funding that transfers with students from urban to suburban districts.
• To foster two-way desegregation, create urban magnet schools that appeal to suburban parents.
• Interdistrict desegregation programs improve the academic and social outcomes of all participating students, but may not meaningfully impact regional segregation trends. All districts, both urban and suburban, benefit from regional desegregation efforts.
• Program participants experience the most beneficial academic outcomes when students are given equitable access to gifted programs, advanced coursework and other district resources.
• Districts considering phasing out their programs should reassure parents that the district remains committed to their children, no matter what the final decision.

Challenges


“The State of Integration 2018” includes reports from districts in four geographic regions. NCSD’s strategic plan commits to a regional outreach strategy to help highlight and support state and local integration efforts. St. Louis is in Region III.

“We fought this battle over integration in the 1970s and, while it was a painful chapter in this city’s history, we are better for it,” said the Louisville Courier Journal Editorial Board in an August 2018 editorial. “More importantly, our children are better for it. But the forced busing of the 1970s is gone, replaced with a thoughtful system of integrating schools while at the same time giving parents the choice of programs that interest them and their children.”

The report is a collection of essays by the NCSD’s staff and members chronicling some of the new progress and opportunities occurring at state and local levels.

As St. Louis’ Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corp. has reported in this publication and elsewhere, the St. Louis program is one that is studying how to continue its program. VICC’s program has been extended, enabling participating schools to take new students through 2023-24 with an emphasis upon the placement of siblings of all current students. All students enrolled through this extended time may continue attending their selected schools through high school graduation, up to at least 2036.
Conscious & Unconscious Bias and its Impact on Education

By Dr. Charlotte V. Ijei, L.P.C.

How were you socialized as a child? What messages did you receive about other people who did not look like you? Answers to these questions could affect the ways in which different groups of students are accepted by adult leaders in schools, as well as how certain students are disciplined and evaluated academically.

"Bias is a prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person or group compared with another, usually in a way that’s considered to be unfair. Biases may be held by an individual, group or institution and can have negative or positive consequences," says Dr. Renee Navarro, vice chancellor of Diversity and Outreach at the University of California, San Francisco.

Parkway School District administrators participate in a year-long book study, Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People by Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald. This work has had a significant impact on administrators’ ability to speak with others about bias and how it could negatively affect African-American students’ achievements, referral to Special School District, and discipline disparities. Every year, new administrators participate in this same book study, which is facilitated by other Parkway administrators.

In the study, we look at different types of biases that could be negatively affecting African-American students, specifically conscious bias (also known as explicit bias) and unconscious bias (also known as implicit bias). Everyone has biases that exist toward any social group such as gender, age, religion, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc. The focus is on how to recognize bias you might hold concerning African-American students, especially because the majority of our teachers and administrators in Parkway are white.

Parkway still struggles with hiring teachers and administrators of color. It continues to be a Goal 2 initiative of the Parkway Board of Education. Not having people in power who look like them, African-American students can be easily misunderstood if white administrators and teachers do not understand their own socialization process. Many educators have grown up in areas that were not diverse. In early years, several were exposed to misinformation, missing history, biased history and stereotypes about groups different from themselves. People become socialized to believe inaccurate information and it gets reinforced by the media, houses of worship, government and other institutions that reinforce the biases, whether conscious or unconscious.

One of the most common institutions that we battle is education. In schools, African-American students learn to conform to the mores of the majority — white teachers, administrators and students. If they do not conform and whites are either aware or unaware of their biases, African-American students are referred for discipline issues, which causes them to be removed from the educational setting, held to lower expectations, not quickly recognized as being intellectually gifted, and are referred at a higher rate for special school district evaluation. The number of students referred for evaluation is disproportionately higher than their white counterparts.

Parkway has trained equity representatives who sit at the table to interrupt any bias views that might come up. For example, when asked to name some of the strengths of the African-American student, the answers might quickly go to athletics, good humor, the style of dress or the student’s smile. Though these are wonderful traits, strengths in areas of academics might rarely be mentioned. The equity representative would then redirect the conversation in a way to help the teacher dig deeper. Other school districts have trained equity representatives as well. In Parkway, the referral rate and diagnoses have both decreased, but there continues to be more work to do.

Because it is impossible for us to eliminate biases that have been hard-wired from the way we were socialized, it is necessary to continue efforts to recognize bias if we are ever to level the playing field for African-American students in Parkway. Intentional recognition of the biases we hold, acknowledging we have them, will keep teachers and administrators from allowing biases to drive negative thinking about African-American students. Banaji and Greenwald refer to these biases as mindbugs and suggest they may lurk in our subconscious, but we all have the power to “weaken” their influence by examining our actions.

One example of examining one’s actions is a middle school teacher in Parkway who shared his story that, prior to studying conscious and unconscious bias, he had never asked an African-American student, “Is this the best you can do?” When he finally did ask the question, the student eagerly said, “No, it isn’t, and I should have put more effort into the work.” The teacher wept and stated to the group, “In the 25 years that I have been a teacher, I had never thought to ask an African-American student this question, but I am unwavering in asking my white students all of the time. I gave the student a chance to do the work...
Fourth-grader Skylar Wilson may not have her career path mapped out yet, but she certainly has plenty of options to consider.

Skylar, a VICC student at Meramec Elementary School in Clayton, already has a hair care business, but her interests also extend to music (piano, voice and violin), soccer, math and scouting. But this “kidtrepreneur” does know she wants to go to college somewhere in New York.


Skylar Wilson started kindergarten as a resident student in the Clayton School district. When the family moved to St. Louis city during her second grade year, she was able to stay in the Clayton District through the VICC program, effective August 2016.

“She’s an amazing little girl,” said Meramec School counselor Anthony Henderson. “She’s a great kid. She is a good student and a good friend. She’s an empathetic, caring kid.” Skylar’s social life is full, with friends both at school and in her city neighborhood, where she walks neighbors’ dogs.

Skylar also counts among her friends two favorite teachers, Tracy McKenna and Megan Hutson, her former kindergarten teacher whom she visits nearly every day.

Henderson noted that Skylar has been active in Girls on the Run as well as in Black History performances in the past. Her interest in performing may have been spurred by the success of one of her uncles, Sterling K. Brown, who is an Emmy Award-winning star of the TV show “This is Us.”

This year, Skylar’s attention has turned to the fall launch of Skylarlicious Naturals for Kids — The Unicorn Bath and Body Collection, an addition to her line of natural hair care products for kids. She was one of several girls who presented at the Second Annual All Girls Resource Fair and Expo, held Sept. 7 at the Center of Clayton.

The Skylarlicious Naturals line includes scents, bath bombs, smiling style cream moisturizer, leave-in detangler, shampoo and conditioner. Leslie Christian-Wilson, a natural hair stylist herself, created Skylarlicious Naturals for Skylar as a result of countless mother-daughter battles over painful hairstyling sessions. “I wanted to create products that would make doing our children’s hair a bonding experience, not a war zone,” Christian-Wilson said. Now, hair time with Skylar’s long, thick and curly African-American and Native-American hair is fun time.

Skylar and her mom do pop-up events about once a month to benefit charitable causes, and Skylar sells her products in her mom’s hair salon and boutique, Diversity Gallery, located in the historic Ville Neighborhood just north of the Central West End.

Whether Skylar heads for New York for a career in math (her current favorite subject), music, theatre, cosmetology or something else, she is bound to use her entrepreneurial spirit to succeed.

For more about Skylar’s hair care products, visit www.skylarlicious.com, on Instagram @imskylarlicious, and on Facebook at Skylarlicious Naturals.

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over again and he received a B instead of a D just because I decided to challenge my own racial bias.” We must think differently in order to require the best out of each one of our students.

Conscious and unconscious biases can change the trajectory of African-American students for years to come if white teachers do not learn to challenge their biases. Transitioning students from elementary school to middle school, deciding what level of math to recommended for them, will direct their path all the way through high school and beyond. Students must be held to the highest expectations, and teachers must be trained to question whether or not they are operating out of their biases and what is in the best interest of all students.

Where do we go from here? We must understand that everyone has biases. Parkway continues to work toward helping administrators, teachers and department leaders understand and confront their biases each day. It is imperative that we seize the opportunity to continue the conversation because of the implications of not knowing what biases we hold that could negatively impact all students, but specifically, African-American students.
When you walk into a room, what assumptions do you make about the people that you see in the room? Until recently, I was probably only marginally aware that I was making such assumptions, but over the past several years I have learned and read quite a bit about the topic of unconscious bias and how it affects all of us more than we realize. Hidden biases and stereotypes particularly related to race and sex are widespread in our society.

The particularly frightening thing about implicit or unconscious bias is that we are making judgments and decisions on such factors and often are not even aware that we are doing so. Unfortunately, people in general are more likely to choose or associate positive qualities with people who look or sound like themselves or belong to the same social or ethnic group as their own. As Charlotte Ijei discusses in more detail in her article, this could be particularly problematic when the preponderance of teachers, administrators and people with power and influence are white. As a result, even when we say we are not prejudiced, these biases can still manifest themselves in our decisions in surprising ways. As a result, becoming more aware of and examining our biases and the way they affect our decisions is critically important if we truly want to give all our students similar opportunities to be successful.

I believe I have grown quite a bit in this area during the past several years just by becoming aware of these issues, but I also recognize that it is an area that requires continued growth and focus. The impact of such biases that each of us have can have a significant impact on the students that we serve. We must all continue to work on a daily basis to improve and do better in this area.

Clearly this is an area in which there are significant opportunities for all of us to make continuous improvement. With work and close examination, I am confident we all can and will do so.