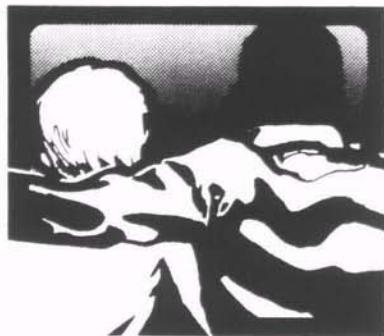


# Getting the Facts Straight About the Effects of School Desegregation



Willis D. Hawley

*Scholars who have reviewed the research on effects of desegregation see reason for cautious optimism.*

Since 1954 and before, many have argued that school desegregation would not work and that it would be harmful to both whites and racial minorities. Increasingly, these people point to research on the effects of school desegregation claiming that it shows that it doesn't work or, at least, that it doesn't work well enough to justify the costs involved.

There are two responses that need to be made to these claims. First, school desegregation is often implemented because of past and present discrimination that denies minorities rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Here the issue is not whether desegregation should proceed, but how can we make it most productive? Or, what is the appropriate remedy to past injustice? Social science research can help in the design of desegregation strategies.

Second, in cases where constitutional issues are ambiguous the question of what steps should be taken to assure equal educational opportunities and to eliminate social and economic distinctions based solely on skin color should be considered. If it were true that no one benefited from school desegregation, it would be ridiculous to pursue such policies. But that is not the case for most communities. Using social science research, it is possible to identify the conditions under which the goals of desegregation can best be achieved.

This article examines the effects of school desegregation in two ways: (1) by suggesting some reasons why those who review the research might misinterpret or misrepresent the evidence; and (2) by summarizing what is known about two significant types of outcomes—academic achievement, and busing and "white flight."

## Why the Research on Desegregation Is Misinterpreted or Misrepresented

If desegregation can have positive consequences for both whites and minorities, why do so many people point to research and argue that the costs of desegregation outweigh the benefits?<sup>1</sup> It is possible to identify some common explanations for the more pessimistic and negative conclusions that have been drawn.

*Selective Reviews of the Literature.* Some reviews of the literature, including Victor Miller's,<sup>2</sup> present a limited and unrepresentative sample of the studies that have been done. These selective analyses may be intentional efforts to make a case for the author's *a priori* assumptions, or they may reflect the difficulty of identifying and securing the full range of studies. As Robert Crain and Rita Mahard point out, less than half of the studies have been published.<sup>3</sup>

*Uncritical Assessments of Methodologically Weak Studies.* Many reviewers of desegregation literature pay little attention to the methodological quality of the studies, especially if the conclusions reached are consistent with the reviewer's presuppositions. In addition, many reviewers do not make the necessary distinctions between adequate and inadequate studies, resulting in inaccurate assessments of the research. Because weak studies are more likely to have negative findings, disregarding differences in the quality of the research can bias the conclusions reached. There are several reasons why weak studies tend to underestimate the positive consequences of desegregation:

1. Longitudinal studies are better than studies that look at only one year. Many studies, however, cover only one year (or one point in time), and this is often the first year after desegregation. The first year of desegregation is often disruptive and requires adjustments of curriculum and personnel. We would expect less benefit from desegregation during this transitional period.

2. Few studies employ an adequate control group. In the absence of a control group, we must assume that students are on the same developmental curve and that the normal course of

events is not different for blacks and whites, or that there are no secular trends relating to the outcome being studied. This assumption, however, is often false. For example, studies that look at the test scores of blacks at two points in time and discover a decline in achievement may be finding the decline of test scores for all races, regardless of whether they experienced desegregation. Black-white achievement gaps do increase with age under normal conditions. Thus, it is possible to find that the black-white achievement gap is not substantially narrowed in a desegregated middle or high school even though desegregation did enhance black achievement.

3. If the measures used in research are unreliable (that is, the inconsistency of the measure over time and/or study population), tests of significance will be biased toward understating the actual relationship and result in small or null findings.<sup>4</sup>

4. If measures used are not valid (that is, they are not accurate ways of describing the variable involved), the factors they measure will not account for differences in outcomes. For example, in studying how desegregation affects racial attitudes, if desegregation is defined in terms of the racial mix of the school rather than in terms that reflect real opportunities for interracial contact, desegregation will probably be found to have no impact on racial attitudes.

Because a substantial number of studies examine the effects of desegregation on achievement, it is possible to empirically test the proposition that methodologically problematic research understates positive outcomes. Crain and Mahard have done that. They show that weaker studies are more likely to report low or negative achievement for blacks than studies that come closer to

<sup>1</sup> An example of arguments of this sort has been raised in: James Coleman. *Chicago Tribune*, September 17, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Victor Miller. "The Emergent Patterns of Integration." *Educational Leadership* 36(5):308-12; February 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Crain and Rita Mahard. "Desegregation and Black Achievement." Forthcoming in: *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Hopkins and Gene V. Glass. *Basic Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978. p. 138.

meeting widely agreed-upon criteria of scientific inquiry.<sup>5</sup>

*Ignoring the Reasons for Different Findings.* Some people who try to summarize the research on school desegregation employ a "body count" approach. That is, they group the studies into two or three categories such as positive, negative, or null evidence. This not only oversimplifies the research findings, but the results of body counts will vary by the criteria the counter uses to decide how much gain or loss for students is necessary before a finding is categorized.

Further, variances in findings can be explained by looking at differences in methodology and in the ways particular variables—including desegregation itself—were defined and measured by the researchers.<sup>6</sup> Some researchers do not report the key variables in shaping the effects of desegregation. Most important, the fact that studies deal with differing age groups, community settings, and in-school experiences of students is seldom considered by reviewers. For example, a number of studies showing negative or insignificant results for achievement are of black students who have been desegregated in their high school years. I will come back to some of the factors that seem to affect the outcomes of desegregation.

*Unreasonable Standards for Deciding When Desegregation Has Positive Consequences.* Many reviewers and researchers establish standards to distinguish between effective and ineffective school desegregation. As noted earlier, these standards differ and often are not discussed, even though accepting a writer's judgment of success or failure may be misleading.

More important, many critics of desegregation have expectations that are unrealistic. For example, David Cohen has argued that since the Coleman Report showed that only one-fifth of the gap in black-white achievement (that is, one grade level) can be removed by desegregation, desegregation is not an important social policy for improving educational opportunities. But desegregation by itself has no chance of eliminating the gap in black-white achievement, which can be traced to significant average differences in education, economic conditions, and the social environments experienced by blacks and whites. In this light, increasing black performance by a grade level seems quite a contribution.

Other evidence on the extent to which desegregation has benefited blacks is available from a review of 29 studies of communities undergoing mandatory desegregation. Blacks benefited in more than 80 percent of the cases. According to available data, the median gain for blacks was about half a grade level in the first year or two of desegregation.<sup>7</sup>

A number of studies conclude that school desegregation does not improve race relations because it has not eliminated racial considerations when students choose friends, playmates, and coworkers in academic tasks. Clearly, such a standard is unreasonable. Since these choices are partly related to neighborhood friendships and positive perceptions of similarity, why would we expect children to be colorblind? In any case, all of the strongest research shows that desegregation leads to more friendly interaction across racial lines. Moreover, there is a fair amount of evidence that teachers and principals can take steps that will improve interracial behavior and attitudes.<sup>8</sup> In short, school desegregation can improve race relations, but some people hold such ambitious expectations for desegregation that by their standards it can only be judged a failure.

### **What the Research Says About the Effects of Desegregation**

The Center for Educational Policy at Duke University is trying to determine what is known and *not known* about the effects of school desegregation. This project, which is supported by the Ford Foundation and the National Institute of Education, has brought together a group of well-

<sup>5</sup> Crain and Mahard, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> As John McConahay shows, many studies dealing with desegregation fail even to report variations in the racial mix of schools and classrooms, and slide over the question of whether schools were actually desegregated as a matter of policy or were racially mixed for other reasons. See: "The Study of the Effects of School Desegregation Upon Race Relations Among Students." Forthcoming in: *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Crain and Mahard, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> This point is developed further in: McConahay, *op. cit.*; Mark A. Chesler, James E. Crowfoot, and Bunyan I. Bryant. "Organizational Contexts of School Desegregation: Contrasting Models for Research and Practice." *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 1979.



known scholars from throughout the country to form the National Review Panel in School Desegregation Research. The National Review Panel has developed a series of papers that, as systematically and objectively as possible, assess the effects of desegregation on particular outcomes.

A full report of the studies undertaken by the panel will be published in the mid-1979 issue of *Law and Contemporary Problems*. These studies deal with the legal status of school desegregation and the findings from social science research on academic achievement; racial identity and self-concept; race relations; post-high school opportunities; community conflict, "white flight," and busing; political aspects of research; and administrative and instructional practices to improve desegregation plans. Some of the panel's conclusions are presented here.

*Academic Achievement.*<sup>9</sup> Nearly every researcher who has examined the impact of desegregation on white children has found that their academic achievement, as measured by conventional standardized tests, is not negatively affected. There are two types of school desegregation studies dealing with minority achievement: (1)

"input-output" studies, such as the Coleman Report, in which racial composition and other school characteristics are correlated with performance on test scores across districts, and (2) studies of particular school systems.

Bridge, Judd, and Mook have recently completed a careful assessment of the major input-output studies.<sup>10</sup> They find, with one exception dealing with students desegregated at the junior high level, that the test performance of blacks is higher in predominantly white schools. In a recent study not included in Bridge *et al.*, Crain and Mahard have examined data from the National Longitudinal Study of the high school class of 1972 and found that black achievement is significantly higher in desegregated schools in the North, but that going to school in predominantly white

<sup>9</sup> Crain and Mahard, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Crain and Mahard, *op. cit.* See also: Meyer Weinberg, "The Relationship Between School Desegregation and Academic Achievement: A Review of Research." In: Betsy Levin and Willis D. Hawley, editors. *The Courts, Social Science, and School Desegregation*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1977. pp. 241-70; and Nancy St. John. *School Desegregation: Outcomes for Children*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975.

schools in the South does not significantly affect black achievement.<sup>11</sup> They suggest that this may be because most of the southern seniors had attended desegregated schools for a short period of time.

Input-output studies have several methodological limitations for assessing the effects of desegregation; for example, they seldom tell us very much about the nature of the school experience or the reasons why a given racial mix came about. Nonetheless, the fact that almost all such studies point in the same direction is significant, even though they differ in the degree of effect found.

Because studies that "simply" compare student and aggregate-level school characteristics by means of test scores usually do not provide much information on the nature of the desegregation experience, Crain and Mahard reviewed the studies of communities that consciously undertook desegregation.<sup>12</sup> After ruling out studies that were inadequate for methodological reasons or were duplicative, they examined the results of 73 studies. They found that 40 studies showed a positive effect of desegregation on black achievement, 21 showed little or no effect, and only 12 showed negative results.

It is almost certain that the earlier black children experience desegregation, the more likely desegregation will have positive effects. A substantial proportion of the studies showing negative or negligible effects of desegregation on black achievement dealt with high-school-age youths. It is interesting to note that the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that between 1969 and 1973, while a substantial amount of desegregation was taking place in the South, the achievement gains for black *nine-year-olds* there increased while scores for the nation as a whole declined, and that the black-white achievement gap declined in the South. The same did not hold for older children who had experienced desegregation only in later grades.

Mandatory desegregation plans also appear more likely to produce positive effects for blacks than voluntary desegregation, especially in the North.<sup>13</sup> An explanation for this finding may be that school systems forced to desegregate by some higher unit of government or the courts

often plan more carefully, develop programs that are more responsive to students and teacher needs, and, in some cases, may receive additional aid (for example, funds from the federal Emergency School Assistance Act). This is not to argue that mandatory desegregation is a preferred approach to integrating schools, but it does suggest two important points: (1) "forcing" people to desegregate does not eliminate the benefits that desegregation might hold; and (2) making desegregation—or any other new educational policy—"work" requires commitment, planning, and persistence.

*White Flight and Busing.* Outside of academic achievement, no other concern over school desegregation has caused more debate than the flight of whites from public schools. What can the available research tell us about this issue? Christine Rossell<sup>14</sup> has recently summarized some of the key findings:

1. School desegregation accelerates the long term decline in white public school enrollment in the year of implementation if it involves the reassignment of white students to formerly black schools or if a school district is above 35 percent black. This implementation year loss may be made up in post-implementation years in school districts less than 35 percent black or those which are countywide. But in high proportion black school districts the initial loss is not made up, at least by the fifth year of desegregation.

2. School desegregation substantially increases interracial contact. Paradoxically, the increase in interracial contact is greatest in those school districts with the greatest white flight (those above 35 percent black). Even as long as ten years after desegregation, districts with extensive, two-way reassignment plans have two to

<sup>11</sup> Crain and Mahard, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Crain and Mahard, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Crain and Mahard, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Christine Rossell. "Myths Regarding the Community Impact of School Desegregation." Discussion paper presented to the National Review Panel on School Desegregation Research, September 1978. For a full discussion of the research on which these conclusions are based, see: Christine Rossell. "School Desegregation and Community Social Change." Forthcoming in: *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 1979.

three times the interracial contact of districts that have not desegregated.

3. Phasing in a plan results in more white flight from desegregation because it gives affected families more time to find alternative housing and/or schooling.

4. Metropolitan plans have less white flight from desegregation than city-only plans.

5. Voluntary plans (including plans that desegregate with only magnet schools) typically cause little or no protest or white flight because they result in little desegregation.

6. White reassessments to formerly black schools result in more than twice the white flight of black reassessments to white schools. White reassessments to other minority schools (Hispanic, Asian, and so on) appear to result in less white flight than reassignment to black schools.

7. Newspaper coverage during the year before desegregation (and probably afterwards) affects the extent of white flight. The more negative the newspaper coverage of desegregation and the schools (controlling for the extent of the plan), the greater the white flight.

8. Protest and overt opposition subside quite rapidly after implementation. At the same time, in some communities attitudes toward desegregation and other racial issues may be more hostile and polarized during the initial period after implementation than before desegregation took place. Nationally, support for the principle of integration has continued to increase, and the increase has been greatest in the South where there has been the greatest forced desegregation.

Understandably, when parents face the possibility that their children will be bused, they worry that the busing will affect their children's achievement. However, studies indicate that busing itself has no adverse affects on learning. James Davies also concludes, after looking at data from 555 desegregated school districts, that "There is no evidence that attending one's own neighborhood school has any effects, positive or negative, on school achievement or social climate."<sup>15</sup>

In summary, the research on white flight, community conflict, and busing suggests that there are costs to mandatory desegregation, but that these costs are much greater in some cities

than others and, in general, seem to be overstated by the opponents of desegregation. In communities where white flight threatens the economic base and long-term social heterogeneity, desegregation plans can be modified to reduce the incentives people have to leave the public schools. Programs like the one that encourages voluntary interdistrict transfers can be encouraged. Metropolitan area-wide plans will largely eliminate residential flight, and some regions could achieve substantial desegregation without massive busing.

Finally, the U.S. Census Bureau announced in December 1978 that for the first time since World War II, the growth of the black population in the cities has halted, and that black migration to the suburbs has increased. In some metropolitan areas, there is some movement of whites back to the cities. Whether the public schools can respond to these opportunities remains to be seen.

## Conclusion

According to the available research, school desegregation almost never impedes the academic achievement of whites, and more often than not, facilitates the achievement of blacks. Moreover, it is possible to identify, both from the desegregation research and research on teaching, several characteristics of schools and instructional practices that either account for or could enhance the positive effects of desegregation.<sup>16</sup>

One of these findings deserves mention. Indeed, it may be the most important finding of all. While only a limited number of studies have focused on the impact of teachers, administrators, and classroom practices, those that do invariably discover that these three factors have a significant effect on the success of desegregation. It is not enough to put children of different races in the same school, and go about business as usual.

At the same time, if public school systems in some communities become overwhelmingly

<sup>15</sup> James E. Davies. "Busing." In: *Southern Schools: An Evaluation of the Effects of the Emergency School Assistance Program and of School Desegregation*, Vol. 2. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 1973. p. 118.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the administrative and instructional practices that seem to foster more positive desegregation outcomes, see: Mark Chesler, *op. cit.*; Garley Forehand and M. Ragosta. *A Handbook of Integrated Schooling*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, 1976.

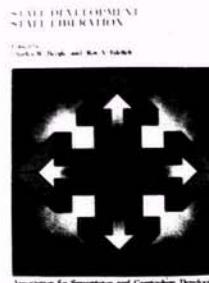
minority-populated, then meaningful desegregation will be eliminated. It is important to emphasize that court-ordered desegregation does not inevitably lead to white flight, and that policymakers and judges could do something about the residential patterns and limited school district boundaries that reduce the possibilities of natural desegregation and increase incentives for flight. Nonetheless, the conditions under which the potential benefits from school desegregation vanish need to be studied more carefully. Moreover, rigid adherence to racial balance among all schools in a system finds no support in the research. There may be a few benefits of mandatory desegregation for both white and minority children where one race comprises only a small percentage of a school's population. In such cases, it may be better to tolerate some schools that are predominantly white, black, or Hispanic. Predominantly one-race schools *can* be places where students prosper.

My intent here is neither to provide a definitive summary of what is known about school desegregation nor to develop policy proposals that might be supported by the research. Rather, I've sought to demonstrate that the research is not simply a mess of inconsistent studies that provide no clues to policymakers. The findings of careful research on school desegregation provide no basis for believing that school desegregation cannot work in most situations. Indeed, some of us see the available evidence as a reason for cautious optimism.

Finally, let me return to the first point made in this paper. Research is important in helping us decide how best to pursue the goal of desegregation. Whether the goal is one worth pursuing is a question of values. Appeals to the research for direction should not obscure the fundamental issue.



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