

Desegregation, School Choice, and Altered Governance:  
A Case Study of Three Attempted Reforms in St. Louis Public Schools  
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Introduction

Education reform continues to be one of the most important domestic issues on the national political agenda. Public opinion polling shows that in the 2012 presidential election, while "Economy" remains voters' number one priority, "Education" remains high on the list, ranking ahead of "Budget Deficit," "Foreign Policy," and many others. Approximately 69% of registered voters said that education was "very important" to their vote in the most recent election cycle (Pew Research Center 2012).

The existing literature on education reform is far from offering a consensus on best practices for struggling urban districts as, across the nation, these districts continue to face a variety of challenging circumstances. Larry Cuban, teacher, former superintendent, and leading education policy scholar, identifies three primary educational reform methods that have been employed in hopes of progress. The first is to "mix up" the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic composition of students within schools through school integration efforts. The second is to disrupt the system with market-driven competition, typically in the form of charter schools or voucher systems, by providing parents with options and allowing them to choose the schools that best suit their student's unique needs. The final option Cuban discusses is altering the governance structures of schools, shifting authority from the traditional elected board to an appointed board, the city's mayor, or a state board (2010).

The St. Louis Public Schools (hereafter referred to as SLPS) provide a fascinating case study of various school reforms that began after the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* that separate schooling for black and white children did not provide equal educational opportunities. The historical narrative of SLPS is a dramatic one, and its constituents have changed significantly over the years: mid-20<sup>th</sup> century enrollment in SLPS was consistently above 100,000 students (Moss 2009), with the city's total

population reaching over 850,000 (Forstall 1995). In the 2002-2003 academic year SLPS enrolled approximately 39,916 students, and at present this number has dropped to just 22,516 students (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2012a, hereafter DESE), as the city population has fallen to around 318,000 (Missouri Census Data Center). The widespread disinvestment in public schooling is evident, as families of all socioeconomic backgrounds have withdrawn their children from the public schools in favor of charter or private schools, often favoring St. Louis County over St. Louis City. Proportionally, white enrollment has dropped, while the proportion of black students has remained constant, and proportional enrollment of both Asian and Hispanic students has steadily increased (Table 1). Despite the efforts of well-intentioned activists who have attempted to implement reforms in SLPS at various points during the past several decades, St. Louis is still recognized as one of the lowest-performing and bitterly divided districts in the nation.

The district has been failing to provide a quality education to its students for several years, both in practical terms and as measured by federal standards. The No Child Left Behind act of 2001 calls for students to be tested at least once per year during grades 3-8 and once in high school. Schools must meet Annual Yearly Progress (hereafter AYP) standards approved by the federal government (McGuinn and Hess). St. Louis faced one of the most severe sanctions under NCLB in 2007 due its recurring failure to meet proficiency standards.

In my Capstone paper, I provide an overview of the three primary reform mechanisms that have been developed and implemented over the past half century in United States cities and major metropolitan areas, each reaching varying levels of success. The following excerpt will focus on one reform mechanism in particular: desegregation. In the conclusion, I will address St. Louis's unique position in the overall education policy debate.

## **Reform #1: Desegregation**

Some educational reforms advocate socioeconomic and ethnic integration of America's schools, placing blame for the failure of urban schools on the continued de facto segregation of our public education system. A portion of the introduction to *Urban Schools, Public Will* encapsulates one central tenet of this theory of educational reform:

We celebrated the judgment [of Brown], but we refused to carry it out. The discomfort this contradiction generates has intensified as our commitment to segregation continues to impose failing schools and inadequate education on students of color. To contain this discomfort, we increasingly treat urban public schools as if they had created their segregated and inadequate conditions and were solely responsible for the national failure to effectively educate poor students of color. (Fruchter 2007, 7)

Theoretical foundations for school desegregation as a reform mechanism point to substantial evidence that students living in poverty consistently perform better when they attend racially integrated, middle-class schools. Gary Orfield of Harvard University, the nation's leading researcher on school desegregation, observes that one strong, consistent finding in education research is the conclusion that all children perform better in middle-class schools (Orfield and Eaton 1996). The reasons for this are numerous.

Generally speaking, middle-class schools tend to set higher expectations for their students, and middle-class schools and families attending these schools are better equipped with financial resources and other assets to supplement the education provided by the schools. It is important to note that, while per-pupil spending in impoverished districts often exceeds that of middle-class districts, more affluent families are typically able to enhance their children's education by offering financial resources both to the school and to students at home. Lower-income schools do not have this additional benefit (Orfield 2001). Perhaps as an effect of having access to these resources from an early age, middle-class children enter school better prepared for the curriculum, and this preparation raises overall standards in the class. For example, middle-class children have a significantly broader vocabulary by the time they enter the classroom, thus exposing their lower-income peers to

a wider variety of concepts in the social environments of integrated classrooms (Tough 2009). Teacher quality is also an important consideration when examining middle-class versus lower income schools. Research shows that teachers are attracted to middle-class schools, not necessarily because of a difference in pay, but because of more humane working conditions (Chaplin et. al. 2002). Other scholars provide evidence supporting the positive effects of integration with studies of much more specific phenomena. A 1990 study by Eric Camburn shows that black and Latino students in elite law schools almost always came from integrated primary and secondary schooling. Orfield (2002) writes, "Longitudinal research at the college level shows long term gains in understanding complexity from integrated educational experiences" (10). Both white and minority students reported learning collaboration skills with other groups (Orfield 2002), displaying an overall higher level of cultural competence facilitated by integrated educational settings.

The process of desegregation in cities around the country has been a tumultuous one. This method of reform can be divided into two primary modes of implementation: mandatory desegregation and voluntary desegregation. Mandatory desegregation came in the form of inter-district busing with non-contiguous attendance zones, disdainfully called "forced busing" by opponents. Prior to 1974, cities around the country implemented mandatory busing policies that were met with considerable criticism, particularly from whites. Ironically, the white public claimed to be overwhelmingly supportive of desegregation efforts, but overall the same demographic vehemently opposed mandatory busing, with estimates of white support ranging from less than 10% to around 15% based on survey data collected through the 1970s (Rossell 1978; Orfield 2001; Sears, Hensler, and Speer 1979). While some constituents, both black and white, cited concerns over the inefficiency of busing students inordinate distances from their own homes (Fuller 2000), the majority of resistance came from the white community and was rooted in a segregationist viewpoint that integration by busing was an attack on freedom of choice. Politicians like

George Wallace capitalized on this intolerance, calling for a return to free choice and making busing a political issue on the national stage (Harvey and Holmes 1979).

The success of desegregation efforts has ebbed and flowed over the past several decades, and the movement has yet to achieve widespread success. In 1977, even after over 20 years of desegregation efforts, the United States Commission on Civil Rights acknowledged that "school segregation has not come about accidentally or because of segregated housing patterns but through deliberate discrimination by government officials." The Commission also reported that it was "abundantly clear" that these patterns violated the constitution (Taylor 1977). Even with this evidence, the patterns continue. Scholars overwhelmingly point to the 1990s as a period of resegregation (Orfield 2001; Frankenburg, Orfield, and Lee 2003; Logan and Stults 2011). A 2003 report published by the Harvard Civil Rights project shows that one sixth of the nation's black students are now being educated in "apartheid schools," virtually all non-white schools that are plagued by extreme poverty and limited resources, often accompanied by significant health risks. This proportion is even higher in the Northeast and Midwest, where one fourth of black students are educated in all-black schools (Frankenburg, Orfield, and Lee 2003). At a 50<sup>th</sup>-anniversary conference on the Brown v. Board decision at Yale University, Hillary Clinton reported, "In the past fifty years, we've gone from an educational system that was divided by rule to one that is divided by routine, reality, and resources[...]the erosion has happened by dilution of Brown's promise, one decision at a time" (2005).

Because cities typically contain much higher proportions of minority populations than suburban areas, desegregation efforts have been predicted to be ineffective without inter-district, city-suburb cooperation. In St. Louis in 1970, for instance, approximately 40.7% of the city population was black, compared to only 4.8% of the county population (Barnett 1981). "In short, we have come to a point where substantial integration of public schools can be accomplished only if the area covered is larger than the city itself," reported the Commission on Civil Rights. "If the responsibility to desegregate ends at the city line, the

decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* will provide little or no tangible benefit to many millions of children who live in large cities" (Taylor 1977).

St. Louis is one of few cities to have implemented a metropolitan desegregation plan that resulted from several years of litigation in a discrimination lawsuit brought against the St. Louis Public Schools. St. Louis has subsequently witnessed the rise and fall of one of the largest inter-district transfer programs in the country. The region suffers from a long history of segregation in schooling, housing, and other sectors. Until the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, black students living in many suburban districts were bused out of district to receive their high school education, with only a few schools in St. Louis City, Webster Groves, Kirkwood, and Kinloch accepting black students. In the 1949-50 academic year, 19 county districts sent 147 students to all-black high schools in St. Louis City. Many black students also attended Douglass high school in Webster Groves (Barnett 1981). From 1954 to 1963, SLPS formally ended segregation in its schools and operated on a "colorblind" policy, maintaining no formal records on the race of students in their schools.

This policy did not effectively address desegregation, however, and in 1972, Minnie Liddell, an SLPS parent, filed suit against the district claiming that her school-age son was receiving an inferior education in the all-black public school he was attending. Records show extremely high concentrations of black students in certain areas in the city and the county, with two thirds of black students in 1978 - 46,800 students - enrolled in schools that were 95 to 100 percent black (Colton, Levine, and Eubanks 1979). After almost a decade of litigation, the court determined that St. Louis legally qualified for a mandatory, inter-district metropolitan desegregation plan.

Court oversight of the desegregation program ended in 1999, but remnants of the bitter battle for integration are evident in today's SLPS. School segregation and racially-fragmented residential patterns remain a significant struggle for the district. The region consistently ranks highly on lists of "most segregated cities," with scores on segregation indices from 2010 census data placing St. Louis in the ten most divided regions (Logan and

Stults 2011). School district demographic data from Missouri's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education shows extremely different racial compositions of the SLPS student body than city residents as a whole. Presently, St. Louis city is approximately 44% white and 51% black or African American. According to 2011 data, 80.5% of children enrolled in SLPS are black and only 13.5% are white. Furthermore, the city has a population of over 67,000 school-age children (Missouri Census Data Center 2010) yet only approximately 23,000 are currently enrolled in St. Louis Public Schools, either traditional public schools or charter schools (DESE 2012a). This means that 44,000 students attend private schools or other schools outside the city – almost anyone with sufficient resources has quickly fled from the district, representing both a psychological and a tangible disinvestment in public education in St. Louis. Wells and Crain highlight the depth of St. Louis's racial tensions in their book *Stepping over the Color Line*: "The story of school desegregation [in St. Louis] across city-county borders illustrates how truly separate and unequal our society has become and how difficult it is for the educational system alone to change that" (2002, 3).

[...] <sup>1</sup>

### **Moving Forward: Recommendations for St. Louis**

St. Louis has a unique sociocultural history that calls for a nuanced analysis of the region's race relations in the current conversation about school reform. Reforms have been tried and, as shown by the performance indicators described earlier in this paper, have not succeeded in catalyzing widespread gains in achievement. Part of the failure of reform efforts to date may be attributed to the reluctance with which they were implemented and the fragmented nature of the networks that supported each reform. Lana Stein noted in 2000, "St. Louis was ill prepared to respond to the demands for desegregation and

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this website, the sections on school choice and alternate governance have been omitted. Full paper available on request.

educational equality” (114). Racial and socioeconomic integration of schools should still be an ideal to strive toward, for reasons both moral and educational, but history has shown that mandatory integration efforts are ineffective. The deeply rooted conflict over busing and the public attention afforded to the Liddell lawsuit, including the white public’s backlash that came along with it, exacerbated the very racial tensions that desegregation was meant to help relieve. Furthermore, competing ideologies over school reform have, ironically, weakened the effectiveness of each particular effort. The debate over desegregation, for example, overshadowed academic achievement during the several-year litigation. During all of this, it has been relatively unclear to the average parent to whom their children’s schools and teachers are held accountable. In the wake of this extreme turmoil, it is unsurprising that student achievement is not improving or receiving the attention it deserves.

Taking the current state of SLPS into account, the first step toward district improvement must be a continued collaborative effort to stabilize the organization and governance of the district.<sup>2</sup> While performance trends since 2007 have turned gradually upward, overall the schools are still seriously underperforming, showing that SLPS has not progressed far enough away from their status earlier in the decade to ensure that it would not regress to the same state upon return to the old order. Although many parties cautiously celebrated the return of provisional accreditation to the district in October 2012 (Singer 2012; Nicastro 2012), the schools have a very long way to go in terms of organizational stability and academic performance before a celebration is warranted.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2007, the St. Louis Public School district was subjected to one of the most severe sanctions suggested by NCLB when its school board was stripped of governing authority. The district’s accreditation was revoked by the state of Missouri and its governance shifted from the traditionally elected school board to a three person, state-run Special Administrative Board. The SAB consists of one person appointed by the mayor of St. Louis, one appointed by the Governor, and one by the President of the St. Louis Board of Aldermen (SLPS). The Special Administrative Board effectively took control of the district in June 2007 (Smith 2009). Dr. Kelvin Adams was appointed superintendent of SLPS in 2008 and has remained dedicated to his position, providing the strong leadership and stability to the district that none of the preceding superintendents since 2002 have been able to. Dr. Adams’s tenure as superintendent has served to provide some consistent leadership over the past four years, but the extreme instability until 2008 caused the district to plunge to a level of chaos that cannot be addressed within just a few years and, furthermore, by one superintendent alone.



[...]

Education options must be significantly expanded so that each and every child has the opportunity to attend a quality school within or sufficiently near his or her area of residence. School choice cannot be taken seriously as a potentially successful reform mechanism if the impacted population is a mere one-sixtieth of the city's school-age population, as it is today in St. Louis. Accessibility and transportation-related limitations must also be taken into account when dealing with overwhelmingly impoverished school populations with limited resources, particularly considering that St. Louis offers only moderate-quality public transportation options. Due to many poor families' limited access to personal vehicles, students must have access to schools that they can reach without having to navigate complex webs of bus routes or find alternative transportation. This condition also affects parental involvement, as parents who are geographically isolated from their child's school will be faced with much greater costs – both in terms of real expenditures and opportunity costs - if they must both find transportation for their child and for themselves to be involved with the school.

Ultimately, reforms must be driven by the fundamental understanding that every single child, regardless of their location, has a right to a free, quality, public education. Debates over busing are just one example of the how true culture change is difficult, if not impossible, to impose on the populace. If the district stabilization and choice expansion initiatives above are enacted in such a way that they instigate widespread improvements in achievement, this will generate the positive media attention necessary to lure middle-class families back into the city and create a more organic integration movement. Voluntary reinvestment in the public schools by middle-class families will be more effective than forced, top-down integration methods in eliminating the pervasive stigma attached to SLPS. This will certainly not be easy or happen overnight, but other cities have proven that district turnaround is possible when stakeholders from various sectors collaborate to implement a comprehensive reform strategy. Whatever educational reforms are pursued, absolutely

critical to their success is execution with a shared vision, intentional planning, and a deep commitment to public education by all stakeholders, including top-level bureaucrats, the district's constituents, and all those in between.

Table 1. *St. Louis Public School District Enrollment by Race, 2002-2011*<sup>1</sup>

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Total number of students	40,868	39,916	38,374	36,045	35,361	32,135	27,574	26,108	25,046	23,576
% White	16.8%	16.3%	15.9%	15.2%	14.0%	13.6%	13.6%	13.7%	13.7%	13.5%
% Black	80.5%	81.0%	80.9%	80.9%	81.8%	81.7%	81.4%	81.0%	80.6%	80.5%
% Asian	1.5%	1.3%	1.5%	1.7%	1.7%	1.9%	2.2%	2.3%	2.5%	2.7%
% Indian	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.2%
% Hispanic	1.2%	1.3%	1.5%	2.1%	2.3%	2.5%	2.6%	2.7%	2.9%	3.1%

<sup>1</sup> All data collected from the Missouri Comprehensive Data System, published by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE 2012a).

Table 2. *St. Louis Public School District Annual Performance Targets and Adequate Yearly Progress Indicators, 2002-2011*<sup>1</sup>

		2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Communication Arts	Annual Proficiency Target	18.4%	19.4%	20.4%	26.6%	34.7%	42.9%	51.0%	59.2%	67.4%	75.5%
	District Proficiency	15.8%	14.9%	17.4%	19.0%	19.9%	19.5%	21.6%	27.5%	30.7%	33.1%
	AYP Indicator Met?	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met
Mathematics	Annual Proficiency Target	8.3%	9.3%	10.3%	17.5%	26.6%	35.8%	45.0%	54.1%	63.3%	72.5%
	District Proficiency	11.0%	12.7%	16.7%	16.9%	17.4%	17.2%	17.6%	19.6%	26.9%	30.9%
	AYP Indicator Met?	Met	Met	Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met
Attendance	District Attendance Rate	90.8%	90.6%	90.8%	89.0%	88.7%	88.7%	88.6%	90.3%	91.3%	92.0%
	AYP Indicator Met? <sup>2</sup>		Not Met	Met	Not Met	Not Met	Not Met	Met	Met	Met	Not Met
Graduation	District Graduation Rate	53.30%	60.2%	62.0%	60.2%	55.7%	54.8%	55.9%	57.1%	60.9%	62.3%
	AYP Indicator Met? <sup>3</sup>		Met	Met	Not Met	Not Met	Met	Not Met	Not Met	Met	Not Met

<sup>1</sup> All data collected from the Missouri Comprehensive Data System, published by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE 2012 a and b).

<sup>2</sup> Attendance performance target is determined as follows: Attendance rate must be at least 93% or demonstrate improvement from the previous year in order to meet the additional indicator target. Only applies to elementary and middle schools. (DESE 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Graduation performance target is determined as follows: A school must have a graduation rate of at least 85% or demonstrate improvement from the prior year in order to meet the additional indicator target. If the graduation rate is 75.0% - 84.9%, improvement must be  $\geq 2\%$ . If the graduation rate is less than 74.9%, improvement must be  $\geq 5\%$ . Only applies to high schools. (DESE 2011).

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