



When Race Matters

by [Sean P. Corcoran](#) & [Jennifer Booher-Jennings](#) — August 22, 2007

Public debate over the recent Supreme Court desegregation ruling has overlooked what may be the most damaging consequence of racially isolated schools—unequal access to our nation’s best teachers. Recent research has demonstrated that teacher decisions over where to teach depend on the racial composition of schools as much or more as on relative salaries. As a result, the Court’s decision to limit the use of race in school assignment may only exacerbate the unequal distribution of teachers across schools. Districts must be vigilant about the distribution of teachers as they consider the educational implications of increased segregation. Through careful monitoring and targeted policies, districts can avoid the invisible inequalities in teacher quality that so frequently accompany racially segregated schools.

Public debate over the recent Supreme Court desegregation ruling has overlooked what may be the most damaging consequence of racially isolated schools—unequal access to our nation’s best teachers.

The Roberts Court and a growing chorus of commentators have embraced a sunny optimism, insisting that we should simply ensure that all schools are good. How students are divided between schools, they argue, makes little difference if all schools have the necessary resources to provide an adequate education.

Indeed, for years racial segregation assured unequal access to adequate school resources. Children of color concentrated in low-wealth communities attended schools that simply lacked the tax dollars their suburban white counterparts enjoyed. Today, funding disparities between school districts have sharply eroded, thanks to progressive state legislatures and an energetic judiciary. At least on paper, schools operate on a much more even playing field than in the days of *Brown*.

But the Court’s new optimism blithely assumes that the ingredients of a high-quality education can easily be decoupled from the racial composition of schools. While this may be possible for dollars and cents, it is much less likely to hold for education’s most vital resource—its high-quality teachers.

It is a well-established finding that teachers are unevenly distributed across districts and schools, with less-qualified teachers disproportionately located in high-minority schools. Teachers in these schools, on average, have less experience, are more frequently unlicensed, come from less selective colleges, and have lower academic aptitude than other teachers. A recent Duke University study (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005), for example, determined that the average black student is 54 percent more likely to encounter a novice teacher than the average white student. These findings hold even in the highest-spending minority school districts.

How teachers are distributed across schools is a function of both residential patterns and teacher preferences. A 2005 study of teachers in New York State (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005) found that teacher labor markets are remarkably local, with 61 percent of new teachers accepting their first job within fifteen miles of their hometown, and 34 percent working in the same school district in which they attended high school. This “preference for home” extends to teachers who locate away from their hometown, but accept jobs in districts demographically similar to the one in which they grew up.

We also know from recent research (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004) that teacher decisions over where to teach depend on the racial composition of schools as much or more as on relative salaries. That is, given the choice, teachers prefer not to teach at schools with a high concentration of minority students. This preference persists even after proxies for race—such as class—are taken into account. Racially isolated schools present unique challenges that many teachers simply are reluctant to undertake. Often, teachers who do accept these challenges sadly leave in frustration after only a few years of teaching.

The Court’s decision to ban the use of race in school assignment may only serve to exacerbate the unequal distribution of teachers across schools. Through teachers’ “preference for home,” the nation’s residentially segregated communities are already mirrored in the segregation of teachers and teaching talent across schools. Where racially isolated schools serve as a deterrent to new teachers, any decision that further isolates minority students in individual schools will only accelerate the loss of talented teachers from high-minority schools. In integrated schools, children of color benefit from a cadre of higher-caliber teachers they simply would not have access to were their schools racially segregated.

To be sure, we can point to schools with high concentrations of African-American students that serve students exceptionally well and are staffed by excellent teachers. Too often, however, the existence of such schools is used to argue that racial composition is irrelevant. Justice Clarence Thomas invoked this logic in his concurring opinion, writing, “Even after *Brown*, some schools with predominately black enrollments have achieved outstanding educational

results" (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle*, No. 05-908, Slip Op. Thomas at 17, U.S. June 28, 2007). But the stubborn currency of public policy trades in rules and average effects, not exceptions.

What remains unknown is exactly how much the Court's decision will affect schools' racial composition. The answer to this question depends, in large measure, on how states and local school districts choose to respond.

Districts must be vigilant about the distribution of teachers as they consider the educational implications of increased segregation. Through careful monitoring and targeted policies, districts can avoid the invisible inequalities in teacher quality that so frequently accompany racially segregated schools.

References

Boyd, D., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2005). The draw of home: How teachers' preferences for proximity disadvantage urban schools. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 24, 113-132.

Clotfelter, C.T., Ladd, H.F., & Vigdor, J. (2005). Who teaches whom? Race and the distribution of novice teachers. *Economics of Education Review*, 24, 377-392.

Hanushek, E.A., Kain, J.F., & Rivkin, S.G. (2004). Why public schools lose teachers. *Journal of Human Resources*, 39, 326-354.

Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle, No. 05-908, U.S. June 28, 2007.

Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: August 22, 2007
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 14589, Date Accessed: 9/6/2007 2:01:06 PM

[Purchase Reprint Rights for this article or review](#)