

Supreme Court Case Brief
Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District

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The United States public education system has come a long way since Chief Justice Warren read the unanimous decision of *Brown v. The Board of Education* in 1954 concluding that separate public educational facilities are inherently unequal. Children have been attending schools across the country with a mix of racial backgrounds, adding to their overall learning experiences. Fifty-four years later, many racial minorities are still struggling to succeed in a scholastic environment. The following Supreme Court Case brief of *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* argues in favor of racial integration policy in public schools in Seattle and Louisville by examining the benefits to students from racial integration and refuting arguments not in support of such a policy.

Summary of Facts of the Case:

As a basis of understanding for school racial integration policy, the Constitution permits local communities to adopt desegregation plans even where it does not require them to do so, according to the case. An integration educational policy is within the broad discretionary powers of school authorities. Seattle School district has been proactively implementing school desegregation policy since 1956. From using a racial criterion for student placement (1963) to requiring race-based transfers and mandatory busing (1977) to labeling schools as racially “balanced” or “imbalanced” (1978) to the current policy of a “racial tiebreaker” for oversubscribed schools (1996), Seattle School District has been operating within their power as expressed in the Constitution. The current policy deemphasizes the use of a racial criterion and increases the likelihood of a student receiving his or her first or second choice. In the case that a school is “oversubscribed” with a particular population of one race, the district assigns a “racial tiebreaker” to place those children in other schools, a policy in which the *Parents Involved in Community Schools* objected. Similarly, Louisville implemented an integration policy of a

voluntary student assignment plan requiring a minimum black enrollment of 15%, and the community objected to the policy on similar grounds.

Support of School Integration Policy:

First, the academic performance of racial minority students is related to racial integration policy. Minority students who attend a school with a diverse student population often show increased academic performance. In the case of Seattle, many of the black students achieved greater academic success through integration. Black students' educational achievement is improved in integrated schools as compared to racially isolated schools, and the earlier that black students are removed from racial isolation, the better their educational outcomes.

Research has found that black students are being denied equality of educational opportunity for school districts that are not well integrated in terms of student social class or student race, and transferring from an elementary school to a junior high school, which has a lower proportion of blacks in the student body, adversely affects the achievement of blacks. (Winkler, 1975) Also, research has found that the racial composition of black students' high schools had an effect on postsecondary educational attainment, with students who attended desegregated schools showing higher attainment. (Braddock & McPartland, 1982)

Second, racial integration policy in public schools is beneficial to society because it prepares children for the workforce. Justice Breyer acknowledges that the "skills needed in today's increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas and viewpoints." Being that many companies today do business globally, have employees in multiple countries, and conduct business transactions in more than one language, it would benefit children to have exposure to people of other races early in life. Research has found that blacks who attend integrated schools are more likely to hold non-

traditional occupations, and those occupations achieve noticeably higher wages and have higher educational attainment. (Crain, 1969)

And third, racial integration policy can have a positive effect on a handful of economic and social issues. Justice Breyer states in the case that integration “is an interest in continuing to combat the remnants of segregation caused in whole or in part by these school-related policies, which have often affected not only schools, but also housing patterns, employment practices, economic conditions, and social attitudes.” School integration may not only improve a student’s academic achievement, but it may also improve their quality of life as well. Research has found that different skills in a production unit may increase overall productivity; therefore, the potential economic successes of a business may increase with greater diversity in its workforce. (Lazear, 1999)

Argument against School Integration Policy:

Support for the opinion against school integration policy may cause greater harm to public school children than the plaintiffs suggest. First, the supporting opinion suggests that racial imbalance in schools can result from any number of innocent private decisions, including voluntary housing choices. Many people of low economic status don’t necessary have a choice in their housing; therefore, their choice of school is similarly limited. Research has shown that homeownership rates are lower among minorities and can be partially attributed to their lower incomes, wealth, and younger age, among other factors. (Wachter & Megbolugbe, 1992) Minorities may not have the same ability to choose a public school in which to attend because of their lower economic predisposition.

Also, this opinion suggests that “simply putting students together under the same roof does not necessarily mean that the students will learn together or even interact.” That may be

true. But if those students are never given the opportunity to learn under the same roof from similar qualified teachers with sufficient learning resources, will they ever succeed? All students, both majority and minority, should be given an opportunity to learn from and interact with each other.

A recommendation for non-race integration policy provided by this opinion suggests implementing a policy of strategic site selection of new schools. In Seattle's case, only one new school was built in 44 years. And in many other urban areas where school district attendance is declining, administrators are forced to close schools, not open new ones for the purposes of racial diversity. This recommendation implies that school districts have disposable revenues to devote to racial diversity within schools. In reality, many school districts in California, for example, will have to cut educational programs because of the \$507 Million budget shortfall next fiscal year, leaving no room for "strategic site selection." (Yi, 2008) A more effective usage of available funds would be racially integrating current school facilities, not building entirely new facilities in "strategic" locations.

According to the case, the plaintiffs also contest the racial classifications used in Seattle and Louisville to not be narrowly tailored "to the goal of achieving the educational and social benefits asserted to flow from racial diversity." For example, Seattle's race classifications were white and non-white. In actuality, these classifications were more like useful starting points for racial diversity. After all, school choice was the predominant factor of which 80% of high school entering 9th graders will attend, not the racial tiebreaker.

Implications of the Court Ruling:

A court ruling supporting the racial integration policy of Seattle and Louisville School Districts will have many important positive implications to many stakeholders. First and

foremost, racial integration provides students of racial minority the chance at the same academic success of their racial majority counterparts. Research from the case suggests that students achieve greater academic success when the student population of a school is more racially diverse. Integration will have a positive effect on diverse housing in communities and increase the economic potential for minorities. Also, exposing children to other races early in age will improve their social attitude and reduce stereotyping based on race.

Conversely, a court ruling prohibiting or restricting the racial integration policy of the Seattle and Louisville School Districts will have negative implications. Many students, most of whom are minority, will be forced to attend schools of lower academic achievement while the racial majority receives a better education. Economic struggle will continue to occur in communities surrounding the schools with a higher minority population. The underperforming schools, many of which are the high minority schools, will be in danger of closure due to the No Child Left Behind law. NCLB ignores the importance of multiculturalism to effective student learning and forces schools to achieve high test scores at the expense of true education. (Fusarelli, 2004) And racial discrimination and stereotypes based on race may continue to foster policy on the differences between students of other races.

Closing:

Public school racial integration policy battles many challenges in order to be successful. These challenges, although very real and overwhelming for school administrators to manage, have been overcome in many cases. School integration has occurred throughout the country, and many students of all racial backgrounds have achieved greater academic success because of it. It is the responsibility of the United States government to ensure equal academic potential for all children, regardless of race and predisposition. School integration policy does just that.

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