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This is America: The Morris District's Potential to be a Model of School Diversity

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This



is



America



The Morris School District's Potential to be a **Model of School Diversity**

By Professor Allison Roda, Ph.D., Division of Education





Dr. Roda is an education researcher and scholar, and she spent years examining the process of school segregation—both between and within schools, in New York and New Jersey. She was intrigued when asked to join a research team that was going to look at a public school district that chose to make diversity work. The related research went on to support a *New York Times* story on school integration.

Background

For Paul Tractenberg—a law professor and long-time legal advocate for educational equity and funding equalization in New Jersey, this was a story that he always wanted to tell. As Paul described it to me, to our co-author Ryan Coughlan, and to the nearly 100 Morristown residents and school staff that we would eventually interview for the Morris project, studying the 1971 *Jenkins Case* that brought about the merger of two racially distinct Morristown and Morris Township K-8 school systems had been percolating in his mind since the early 70's. When we began the project three years ago, we did not anticipate how complicated it would be to put the history of the merger into the current context. We also did not anticipate that Morris would provide such hope in the current neoliberal era of school segregation, inequality, and privatization.

Morris School District (MSD) is one of the most integrated school districts in New Jersey and this is commendable. The district's 45-year history is unique because it is the only district in the state and country that was merged by order of the state commissioner of education for the purpose of achieving racial balance. Today, the district has maintained its incredible diversity. Out of 5,226 students, MSD's 2014–15 demographic profile is 52 percent White students, 11 percent Black, 32 percent Latino, and 5 percent Asian. Approximately 35 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch. Surprisingly, very few people have ever heard of the Morris district, including long-time New Jersey residents and individuals knowledgeable about education in the state.

Morris's diversity stands out when you place it within the context of America's increasingly segregated public school system. According to a recent U.S. government report, the number of segregated public schools in which 75 to 100 percent of students are Black or Hispanic and eligible for free and reduced-price lunch doubled from 7,009 schools in 2000 to 15,089 schools in 2016 (GAO, 2016). The GAO report (2016) also showed that students in segregated schools have less access to educational resources and opportunities, as well as disproportionate numbers of disciplinary infractions. One option to remedy the negative effects of school segregation is to merge school districts or schools. In a sense, this allows students to cross [former] school district boundary lines to achieve diversity. The Morris case represents a unique state effort to enhance district diversity by merging two very different K-8 districts, and to oppose the Morris Township referendum to build a separate all White high school. In the 1970s, achieving racial balance essentially meant bringing together Black students residing



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in Morristown with White students living in the township. Currently, there is a steady wave of Latino students—mostly from Central America, entering into the district. This has challenged the Morris schools in different ways primarily because of the language barrier and difficulties with parental outreach.

Key Factors of Success

Despite the demographic changes over the years, MSD has maintained a positive reputation and a diverse student body. Through our mixed methods research, we sought to find out how and why this occurred when so many other U.S. districts—particularly in the south— have abandoned school desegregation plans. A new report based on our research, Remediating School Segregation (Tractenberg, Roda, and Coughlan, 2016) was recently published by a progressive think tank called The Century Foundation and featured in a New York Times article (Spencer, 2016). In the report, we outline the successes and challenges of MSD, and found that there were and continue to be, three main reasons behind the district’s long-term success:

- (1) The Morristown and Morris Township community is morally committed to public education and the collective benefits of diversity;
- (2) Community members believe that in order to have a successful district, you need to have a supportive community and strong family partnerships with the schools;
- (3) Although, the district’s response to some of the challenges that school diversity imposes on the schools has been slow and uneven over the years, respondents have an optimistic and positive attitude that racial and socio-economic gaps in opportunity and achievement will improve over time.

Like many districts across the country, MSD struggles with achievement and opportunity gaps, such as attaining diversity within high-track classes at the middle school and high school. MSD officials are aware of the problem and have made efforts to progress toward true integration at the school and classroom level. These integration efforts include changing the admissions process for gifted and talented classes, creating heterogeneous math groups in elementary school, using multiple measures for course placement decisions in middle school, eliminating the lowest B-level track in high school, and hiring a high school counselor to





support students of color and to make sure they are prepared for college. School-level respondents say this is not enough, however, to foster cross-cultural exchange among students. Teachers, students, and other school staff recommend that the district do more to sensitize teachers to cultural differences among their students and ensure that teachers do not underestimate, perhaps unconsciously, the educational potential of students of color. Another area that could be improved is for students to experience more moments of integration. Schools could offer more multicultural curriculum, courses and programs to reduce implicit biases and foster an inclusive culture. As the Latino population has grown and the district instituted a separate bilingual high school track, English Language Learners have expressed a feeling of separation and of being invisible in the school. Likewise, Black and Latino students feel out of place in Advanced Placement courses filled mostly with White students.

Regardless of the challenges, MSD alumni and current students, as well as teachers and school staff view diversity as a unique advantage in preparing students for the “real world” that other students in more homogeneous school districts simply do not receive. In fact, every single teacher that we interviewed praised the diversity in the district, as one teacher replied, “I think that’s such a unique strength of the town and the township working together and yet at the same time it’s not a problem. It’s not something that’s ever going to be fully resolved, that you can walk in and go: ‘This is what you do’. This is America. This is what we deal with, America. That’s very different than most of the communities in New Jersey (emphasis added).” Because of the student demographics, teachers stressed the importance of developing connections with the students and their families in order to meet different student needs. For example, during a teacher focus group, one teacher commented that no two classrooms are the same in the school because, as he explained, “we have to structure our schools and our classrooms to try to meet all of the different student needs. We [teachers] all have the mindset that there is no one way to do things. It’s not cookie cutter, but it’s very fun.” Another teacher told a story about an immigrant family who just moved into the district from another state. The school principal asked the teacher to speak with the family because apparently they were not sure they wanted to send their son to school there. The teacher listened to their concerns, and she stopped them and said, “Let me hear from your son first.” She talked to the boy about what he likes to do. Then, the teacher said she started “explaining

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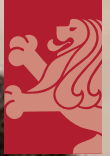
how we try to reach kids in different ways and see them for who they are as individuals. Sooner or later, I used the term ‘neuro pathway’. I don’t know why I used that word, but later I found out that the mother is a neurologist, and, well they stayed and they’re very happy with the school.”

All Things Equal

Substantial evidence also emerged in our interviews that the schools and community are working together to help low-income students overcome challenges in school and at home. This levels the playing field. For example, each student in grades 6–12 is given a personal Chromebook to use in the classroom and to take home to do their homework. The district realized that some low-income students did not have access to the Internet at home—making it difficult to complete their assignments. The Morris Educational Foundation raised funds for Mi-fi devices, which give students access to the Internet in any setting. Additionally, the district is responding to the challenge of educating English Language Learners by recruiting and hiring more Spanish speaking staff. The superintendent reported that since June 2015, the district hired ten bilingual teachers, and 31 percent of all new hires (counselors, administrators, and teachers) speak Spanish.

The district’s strongest commitment to making diversity work is evident by its student assignment plan which extends beyond the district level to the school level. After the merger, respondents explained that the district decided to implement the “Princeton Plan” to diversify elementary schools by pairing a primary (K–2) school with an intermediate (3–5) school. One school was located in the town and the other paired school was located in the township. MSD also uses geography to achieve diversity in schools by designating the center of town as an open assignment area because it was, and still is, where many low-income Black and Latino residents live. Students living in this area are bused to various neighborhood schools across the district to procure racial balance and desegregate schools. Every other assignment area has a neighborhood school. The Morris district’s student assignment policies have succeeded. Instead of allowing parents to choose schools—which can lead to school re-segregation, MSD’s policy provides a structure to support student-level diversity. As our report highlights, the dissimilarity index for Black students in elementary school is at just 2.6. This means that only about 2.6 percent of White or Black students would have to change schools for elementary school-level diversity to perfectly match districtwide diversity. For White and Latino students, the dissimilarity index is just above 4 percent, still an impressive accomplishment especially when compared to the neighborhood segregation levels that hover around 40-50 percent for White, Black and Latino families.





Moving Forward

What lessons can be learned from MSD and applied to other districts across the country? We believe that the Morris remedy of school district regionalization could and should, be used to achieve district and school level diversity for the numerous academic and social benefits it bestows upon students. For example, in counties with high degrees of geographic fragmentation, such as Nassau County, NY or Essex County, NJ small, racially distinct, neighboring school districts could be targeted for regionalization to obtain racial and socio-economic balance. In New York City, a similar process could be applied to merge racially isolated school catchment areas for integration purposes. In addition, districts could use the Princeton Plan that pairs racially segregated schools located across catchment lines to create more diverse K-2 and 3-5 schools. These school assignment policy changes would accomplish two things. One, it would send a clear message about the importance of having diverse neighborhood schools to maintain strong communities. Secondly, it would place more of the burden of school assignment and school choice on the district instead of on the parents whose choices likely contribute to the segregation.

District and policy officials have the opportunity to change the status quo of segregated schools that have been shown to depress educational opportunity and outcomes for low-income students of color, as well as concentrate resources and opportunities for already advantaged students in top performing schools. The Morris remedy to create racial and socio-economic balance would move us towards a more equal, just, and diverse schooling system. It would create the conditions in which more teachers, like the Morris teacher quoted above, would be able to proudly say *'This is America'* when talking about their diverse schools and communities.

Please note: article references available upon request. ■

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