



SCHOOL POVERTY RATES: HOW HIGH BEFORE THEY HARM STUDENTS?



This much is settled science: Poverty matters. A lot. Research reliably finds that schools with higher percentages of poverty have lower levels of achievement for all students, including those from more affluent families. A new [research brief](#) by National Education Policy Center Fellow [Roslyn Arlin Mickelson](#), a professor at UNC Charlotte, asks a key follow-up question: Is there a tipping point beyond which schools swing from more effective to less effective because their poverty rates are just too high? If so, where is that tipping point?

As Mickelson notes in her brief, published last month by [The National Coalition on School Diversity](#), questions like these have become increasingly urgent as many policymakers, educators, and citizens have turned to socioeconomic integration as an alternative for creating diverse schools in the wake of the 2007 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Parents Involved in Community Schools*. The decision placed limits on race-conscious policies, such as student assignment practices, designed to mitigate racial segregation. Magnifying the level of challenge was the Trump administration's [decision](#) this summer to withdraw Obama-era [guidance](#) that outlined non-individualized ways in which K-12 schools could legally take race into account to enhance student diversity. That guidance was based on the concurring opinion of now-retired Justice Kennedy; the record of new Supreme Court Justice Brett M. Kavanaugh suggests he will oppose race-conscious policies in schools.

Given these obstacles to race-conscious school assignment policies, racial segregation is on the rise. Racial segregation is associated with a host of negative student outcomes, according to a [brief](#) co-authored by NEPC Fellows [Gary Orfield](#) and [Erica Frankenberg](#), with Jongyeon Ee and John Kuscera. For example, in a [meta-analysis](#) that ran in the peer-refereed *Review of Educational Research*, Mickelson and her co-authors Martha Cecilia Bottia and Richard Lambert found that school racial isolation has a small, statistically significant and substan-

tively meaningful effect on student math scores. The effect widens as students move from elementary to secondary school. In another [review](#), published in the peer-refereed *Review of Research in Education*, Mickelson and her co-authors Mokubung Nkomo and George L. Wimberly find that attending a desegregated school can lead to multiple long-term desirable outcomes such as diminishing racial prejudices and fears and increasing the likelihood of living, working, and socializing in integrated environments.

While school districts have increasingly prioritized socioeconomic diversity programs, it is unclear what types of poverty ratios schools should strive to maintain. For example, does it still make sense for Wake County Public School System in Raleigh, North Carolina to set 40 percent as the maximum poverty rate for the district's schools? Here's where Mickelson's brief steps in by synthesizing the extant research on school poverty thresholds and educational outcomes.

What Mickelson finds is that this area remains an under-researched question. There is “no reliable and valid body of evidence that points to specific thresholds of poverty concentration that can be used as the empirical basis for school assignment policies.” The main challenge, she notes, is that there are very few studies on this subject. What studies do exist are often conducted by school district staff using a single year's worth of data and/or focusing on a limited subset of students or subjects.

Mickelson calls for additional longitudinal, nationally representative research that uses appropriate statistical techniques to ascertain if there are possible poverty thresholds for different subjects, demographic groups, and grade levels. In the meantime, she advises decision-makers to reduce concentrations of school-level poverty to the lowest feasible levels given the demographics of their communities.

Resources on Schools and Poverty:

- *Is There Systematic Meaningful Evidence of School Poverty Thresholds?* by Roslyn Mickelson, National Coalition on School Diversity
- *K-12 Integration, Desegregation, and Segregation Archives*, University of North Carolina Charlotte
- *Research-Based Options for Education Policymaking: Housing Policy*, William Mathis, National Education Policy Center
- *Diverse Housing, Diverse Schooling: How Policy Can Stabilize Racial Demographic Change in Cities and Suburbs*, Amy Stuart Wells, Columbia University
- *Seeing Past the “Colorblind” Myth of Education Policy*, Amy Stuart Wells, Columbia University

NEPC Resources on Poverty

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