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Desegregating Arlington schools *By Fred Millar*

On Thursday, school officials in Arlington County will kick off a five-month public discussion about how to redraw the [district's school boundaries](#). The system decided to build two new schools and expand four others to address unanticipated overcrowding, and to prepare for this, the boundaries must be redrawn.

The boundary-drawing process, arguably the most important decisions school boards make regarding the allocation of educational resources, could be an opportunity to fundamentally reshape how boys and girls of different races, ethnicities and class backgrounds learn together. Instead, the school board [appears ready to reaffirm](#) the very boundary policies that have led to longtime gross socio-economic isolation, as recommendations [before the board hardly differ](#) from existing policy. It's a process that also allows the schools with the highest concentration of white students — all in wealthier North Arlington — to play a dominant role in the earliest-needed boundary decisions.

Like school districts nation wide, Arlington has many schools that are [increasingly segregated by race](#) and class, [according to federal and local data](#). For example, Carlin Springs Elementary School in South Arlington — the part of the county where many immigrants and moderate income families live — has more poor students than all nine North Arlington elementary schools combined. Nottingham Elementary School has 85 percent white students, while Carlin Springs has 4 percent. Williamsburg Middle School and Yorktown High School in North Arlington have 92 percent and 65 percent white students, respectively, while South Arlington's Kenmore Middle School is 23 percent white and Wakefield High School is 17 percent white. This racial segregation has increased between 1998 and 2010.

These students — many who are poor, many who are minority, some who are both — are attending schools which are racially and economically isolated because of school district policy. [Existing school attendance](#) boundary lines prevent the vast majority of students living inside one zone from attending schools outside their district. Instead, Arlington school zones are designed heavily to favor “neighborhood schools”. But this policy reinforces the patterns of residential socioeconomic segregation rather than seeking diversity independent of those housing patterns.

This racial and socioeconomic school isolation has massive and lasting [impacts on student achievement](#). Social science [research has consistently found](#) that what works for student achievement is not throwing money at high-poverty schools, but integration. Indeed, the major in-school factor that affects student achievement is who your classmates are. This is not a racial or economic bias judgment: Every child can learn, but students learn from their peers. And in schools with high-achieving classmates, their high-income parents will ensure that the curricula, climate and parental participation are at high levels.

The United States' civil rights community has promoted socio-economic integration of schools as the key way forward to closing student achievement gaps. In addition, these leaders assert that focusing entirely on less effective “supplemental resources” for high-poverty and high-minority schools — such as Montgomery County public schools' program to add \$2,000 per student per year to the lowest-achieving schools in the “red zone” — have been extensively tried and is futile. Tacked on programs, such as college tours and

after-school meetings for minority students, mean school leaders are still [trying to live with segregation](#). But Arlington public schools have shown they know how to achieve diversity in a limited way, For the Spanish immersion programs at Key and Claremont elementary schools, school officials deliberately clustered some neighborhoods from North Arlington with some from South Arlington on the east and on the west sides of the county, so both groups could learn the desired language from their peers. This underscores that parents and school officials know the value of educational integration. But this limited exception proves the rule: Arlington's policies are designed to be segregative.

Those of us valuing equal opportunity should insist that starting now, Arlington schools should adopt a policy that no school should have a student diversity profile that varies more than plus or minus 10 percent from the overall diversity profile for the countywide student population. This would not mean that to achieve significant degree of educationally beneficial diversity, a county school diversity standard would need to require absolutely equal diversity. For example, at Carlin Springs Elementary, the concentration of students on free and reduced lunch might be lowered from the roughly 85 percent to perhaps about 40 percent — still 10 percentage points more than the countywide average of 30 percent. Meanwhile, at Nottingham Elementary, the percentage of free and reduced lunch students might be increased from roughly 2 percent to perhaps 20 percent, which is still 10 percentage points less than the countywide average of 30 percent. Racial diversity calculations might also be used to fine-tune these low-income calculations.

Indeed, with expert help, some citizens have begun drawing sophisticated maps socio-economically clustering Arlington neighborhoods using census data. Now we need detailed data from the school officials on student locations, which, so far, school officials have refused and are likely to provide only after some public pressure.

The most important educational resource the local school district allocates with its decisions, fairly or unfairly, is its high-achieving students. If Arlington school leaders continue to draw boundaries isolating high-achieving students into racially and economically isolated wealthy “neighborhood schools,” it is denying its most crucial educational resource to poor and minority kids. And white students are the most racially isolated of all student groups in the United States, thus are denied the benefits of diversity, which many citizens of all races recognize as critical for personal and economic well-being in a global economy.

In short, 20 years of civic silence is long enough on the issue of socioeconomically isolated schools in wealthy, compact Arlington. The school board needs to show a modern-era leadership in not just talking about the value of diversity, but walking the walk, with boundary policies and boundary decisions that (as with the Spanish immersion programs) mix students in diverse schools which will deliver excellent educational opportunities and achievement for all.

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Training. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/therootdc/post/de-segregating-arlington-schools/2012/10/29/d1530fe2-2085-11e2-afca-58c2f5789c5d_blog.html