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One district's tough road toward equity for all kids

By Melissa Krull

Unless our children begin to learn together there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together. — **Justice Thurgood Marshall**

I agree more than ever with these wise words and yet my recent experiences as superintendent make me wonder whether we are any closer today to achieving this vision than we were in 1974, when Justice Marshall wrote them as part of a dissenting opinion over a school integration plan for Detroit.

I say this because even when efforts to increase the achievement of all students are effective and working, it's simply too easy for school boards and other community leaders to work against [the notion of all children learning together](#). I lived through such an experience and it has led me to support positions I would have dismissed a decade ago.

I recently shared my journey as a superintendent in an affluent suburban school district in Minnesota at the second annual conference of the [National Coalition on School Diversity](#), which was held at the Georgetown University Law Center. It seemed particularly relevant given that the theme of the conference was advancing the legacy of the Mendez and Brown school segregation rulings.

In the early 1980s, Eden Prairie, Minnesota, was a largely white homogeneous affluent suburban school district blessed with high-achieving students. Over time our community benefited from an influx of new immigrant students and their families who brought greater levels of diversity to our community.

In 2002, when the [No Child Left Behind law](#) was enacted, we began to measure our successes in a new way. We, like all school districts across the nation, began to look more closely at the achievement data of all of our students.

In doing so we saw, for the first time, that not all of our students were performing well, nor even above average. We discovered that our students reflected some disturbing achievement gaps. Black, Hispanic, low-income, English language learners, American Indian and special education students all came in significantly lower than our high-achieving white students — in some cases 60 percentage points below their white peers.

As the community's demographics continued to shift, it was clear that what we were doing was working very well for some, but not for all.

To get the support we needed to better understand the needs of our diverse learners, we built partnerships with Pacific Educational Group (PEG) and then the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA).

Working from the book "Courageous Conversations," by Glenn Singleton, PEG helped us understand the critical relationship between learning and race. NUA brought new and deeper cultural competency to our teachers and principals, as well as classroom applications framed by neuroscience research. Guided by "The Pedagogy of Confidence" by [Yvette Jackson](#), NUA provided classroom coaches and instructional strategies for all of our kids.

Through professional development, discussions and projects, teachers began "mapping out" what students knew, as well as their interests and strengths. They also began using exercises to prepare students for acquisition of new vocabulary, concepts and content. Materials and activities were added to reflect the experiences and cultures of our increasingly diverse students and to encourage critical and creative thinking.

It took several years to see the full impact of this work, but by 2012 some gaps were reduced by nearly 50 percent and students of color showed sizeable achievement gains. For example, [the gap](#) between white students and black students in reading narrowed 16 percentage points from 2008, when the gap was 42 percentage points. All of this, while the performance of our white students continued to increase.

Academic transformation was, in hindsight, relatively easy to enact. Unfortunately, achieving educational equity was more elusive. Reflecting housing patterns, our primary schools were becoming segregated by income and race. To build on our momentum to ensure that all students had [an equal opportunity to learn](#), we set out to redraw boundaries to make sure our low-income students were distributed across all schools.

As a result, 1,000 students were moved to a different neighboring school in a district encompassing no more than six square miles. We accomplished this while keeping bus rides that were similar to, and in some cases, shorter than previous in years.

The response to the new boundaries was quick and dramatic. Many white families decided we had gone too far and pulled their children from Eden Prairie, enrolling them in nearby districts or schools. Then came the protests, petitions, blogs, nasty Facebook pages and other rage-filled actions.

Still, we persevered with the boundary shift and this past fall the schools were integrated and scores were at an all-time high with significant narrowing of the achievement gap. The trajectory for continued momentum was firmly in place. At the same time, a new board was elected. Opponents of the plan now serve on the board while those supportive

of the shifts are gone. Time will tell whether or not the new board can sustain the changes and resulting elimination of achievement gaps.

The National Coalition on School Diversity Conference gave all of us the opportunity to identify changes that we think will advance the legacy of Mendez and Brown. Given what I've seen and experienced, and given what we see happening in many school districts across this country, many changes are needed:

- * States and districts should review and reconsider open enrollment and school choice options that too often conveniently serve as an exit strategy for families who would rather not have their children in integrated schools.

- * Sanctions should be in place for districts that intentionally or indirectly create white segregated schools. Reward should be offered to districts that proactively and intentionally integrate.

- * There must be a review, revision or revamping of the current and universal school board governance model. School boards across the country that too often vote to satisfy their constituents, their affiliations with political parties or simply to sustain their own personal privileges must be reined in.

Yes, these ideas might seem severe, but for me, existing practices have severe negative consequences. My experiences have taught me that we all sometimes need a little help to do the right thing. If we want to learn to truly live together and to benefit from one another difficult decisions must be made. It might just be the only way.