Episode 251: Segregation in our Schools

Lisa: Hi, I'm Lisa Hernandez

Lizzy: And I'm Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich

Lisa: And we are your host for Scholars Strategy Network's No Jargon. Each month we will discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers without jargon. And this month we are talking about racial inequality in K through 12 schools, and it's back to school season, Lizzy

Lizzy: It sure is. It's back to school season. I have a child in elementary school and starting preschool. You have a little sister in elementary school. We are all talking about public schools in, well, Florida and Massachusetts. Kind of what people might think is the, the opposite

Lisa: Polar opposites.

Lizzy: And yet, and yet, you know what unites them both.

Lisa: Racial inequality? Probably. Oh, there we go.

Lizzy: There's gonna be other things too. I'm sure. I'm just saying, I know that this is a pervasive problem, um, in, you know, in schools all across the states, regardless of what the demographics of those states actually are or other laws about them. It's a real thing in America with quite a history. Um, but you spoke to a researcher about it.

I'm so excited to learn what she has to say.

Lisa: Absolutely. Erica Frankenberg is a professor of education and demography in the College of Education at Penn State. Her research focuses on racial desegregation, inequality in K through 12 schools, and the connections between school segregation and other metropolitan policies. Professor Frankenberg is the director of the Center for Education and Civil Rights.

Here's our conversation.

Lisa: Hi, Professor Frankenberg. Thanks for coming on No Jargon.

Erica: Thanks for inviting me.

Lisa: Of course. So you have written about racial segregation that persists in the school system and I'm really interested to know what these numbers are telling us. Can you break down for me what segregation has looked like for marginalized students the past few decades?

Maybe share some examples for different racial groups.

Erica: Absolutely. I, I'd like to start by, in talking about this topic, with the Brown Supreme Court decision from 1954, that was perhaps one of our most famous Supreme Court decisions, in which, uh, a unanimous court said that segregation in public education is inherently unequal.

At that time, there were 17 states in which Black children and white children went to separate schools, and most of those were in the South or what was the former Confederacy of the United States.

And so at that point in time, there were of course 30 states or so in which children were not segregated, but we had stark segregation in many of our states, including states where most of our Black children were living at the time. As a result of Supreme Court decisions and lower court decisions, as well as efforts by other branches of the federal government, notably Congress in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, that increased education funding from the federal government, we finally saw a dramatic improvement in the South, and by 1970, Black and white students were actually the most integrated in the South. Um, so a pretty dramatic change in a little over 15 years of effort. And then what we saw in the statistics using federal education data is that for several decades, Black students were going to majority white schools more often in the South than in any other region of the country.

And this really, sort of was increasing from, actually before 1970, but, uh, 1970 as sort of when Black students in the South became more more integrated than other regions and had been increasing really through the late 1980s. And then, really after 1988, we've seen a sort of steady decline in the percentage of Black and, uh, Latinx, students who are going to, non-racial, racially segregated schools.

Uh, and so what we see now is nearly 40% of Black and Latinx students go to schools that are 90 to one, to a hundred percent students of color among our public school students. We still see that the South has relatively lower segregation in comparison to other regions for Black students.

But in all these regions, you know, Some, concerningly high percentages. Given what we know from research about why desegregation is beneficial to all children as well as to the students from marginalized backgrounds.

Lisa: So what change in 1988 to cause this steady decline?

Erica: You know, I think first, actually beginning in the mid seventies, there were some Supreme Court rulings that started to limit what desegregation was required. And so, um, one of the most, notable decisions here, Is a decision out of metropolitan Detroit, Michigan.

And so that decision was called Milliken v Bradley. And in it, initially the lower courts had found that the schools in, in Detroit, Michigan were deeply racially segregated and had ordered that in order to remedy the segregation that there should be, um, interdistrict, uh, desegregation plan.

So that was a desegregation plan that would involve 54 school districts, which sounds like a lot of school districts, but because many of these districts were quite small. Um, it actually involved, you know, kids walking across district boundary lines to schools that were close by and, so this was a metropolitan wide plan.

That the lower courts had issued and had been affirmed by the Circuit Court, but the Supreme Court overturned that in Milliken v Bradley and said that you could only fix the problem using the Detroit city limits. And there was a fierce dissent in that decision from Thurgood Marshall who had been one of the lawyers arguing the segregation cases, including Brown.

He said that this is a decision that we will live to regret. It will, um, result in a Black school district and white school district. And certainly when we look at metropolitan Detroit today, some analyses have said that there are the most segregated school district borders because there is, a deeply students of color concentrated in the city of Detroit school district.

And there are some, you know, fairly white and well-resourced schools very close by. And so, you know, certainly one of the factors, particularly in the Midwest and the Northeast where we have a number of very small school districts. The limitation on creating these solutions that reach across district boundary lines is one key reason that we see rising segregation.

And then in beginning in 1990, the Supreme Court issued another set of rulings that sort of relaxed what districts had to do, um, to show that they had fully complied with desegregation and so starting in the early 1990s, we had, hundreds of districts that ended their desegregation order that was overseen by the Court.

Now, that didn't mean that they had to end what they were doing. They could voluntarily keep integrating, but not all districts did because they weren't required to anymore. And there has been some research showing that that particularly in the South, has had really a substantial impact in the extent to which Black students are going to more segregated schools.

So I, I'd say Supreme Court decisions and, and then lower court decisions, interpreting those is a key factor. And then we also have seen a rise of school choice since the early nineties, uh, charter schools, for example, began in 91 or 92. And there are deep levels of segregation in many charter schools, although not all charter schools.

And so, um, there are a number of different factors, both legal and policy-wise that I think helped to explain, uh, the patterns we see today.

Lisa: Could you talk a little bit more about you, you mentioned the Metropolitan plan, and basically, how segregation is seen a lot in metropolitan areas. Does that mean that segregation is mostly a metropolitan issue? Are you seeing it less in maybe rural settings?

Erica: Right. I think we see segregation looking differently depending where we are and, and therefore the solutions and what we can do also sort of differs and, you know, perhaps even the fact that we have these nuanced, situations is why it's hard to find a one size fits all answer to how to solve the problem of school segregation.

So, to, to think about metropolitan areas for a second, we actually see different circumstances depending on what region of the country we're in. The South traditionally has had more of a countywide school district nature. For example, the state of Florida has only countywide school districts, so millions of students, but only 67 countywide school districts.

The advantage that has for metropolitan areas is there are relatively fewer, uh, school districts that students can be sorted between. And so, um, you have both the city and the suburbs to some extent contained within the same school district, given the limitations I just mentioned a few minutes ago, that could be an advantage for crafting school desegregation efforts.

There was one district, in Louisville, Kentucky, actually in the mid seventies that the courts ordered a consolidation of the city school district and the county school district. The city was largely Black. Louisville, Jefferson County surrounding it, was largely white. And so they consolidated it and then formed a desegregation plan.

And in fact, Louisville had some of the longest running substantial desegregation for, for decades after that. And I, I really think that merger into countywide system was a, is important underlying foundation for that. So I think when we think about metropolitan areas, the extent to which, diverse populations are captured within larger school districts is an enabling factor to make school desegregation more likely to be successful.

Although it certainly isn't the only thing, and I think that's also where other metropolitan policies fit in. So if there are metropolitan housing integration efforts, you know, under the Fair Housing Act of 1968, for example. Or there are transportation policies that enable populations to move back and forth more easily.

Those are all factors that can make the efforts of school desegregation potentially more easy. When we think about the Northeast, I live in Pennsylvania. Uh, I think there was a study about a decade ago that looked at the extent to which segregation in metropolitan Pittsburgh and Philadelphia was due to district boundary lines.

And over 75% of it was due to segregation across boundary lines because in the county that has Pittsburgh, there are over 40 school districts alone. And so those are often small and somewhat homogenous. So if we were thinking about that differently, if we had one school district instead of over 40, there could be different opportunities available, to craft desegregation policies.

And so, you know, I think it's both, uh, in metropolitan areas. To what extent are cities and suburbs and even now outer suburbs contained in more heterogeneous, larger school districts, that's really important to consider. And rural areas, certainly there are, sometimes issues of scale that come up, because they're sometimes less sparsely populated.

And again, when we think about rural, And I've, I've done some, some work looking at, racial change in segregation in rural school districts. We actually have very different types of rural areas. Again, here in the northeast rural areas and in the Midwest, it predominantly means largely white, although there are some areas that have an influx of

Latinx, uh, residents. Uh, in the South, of course many of the rural areas are Black and uh, again, here we can see, the use of private schools or other types of school choice can also exacerbate segregation in these less densely populated spaces. And we can also see the formation of new school districts can also

carve out some areas that want to remain separate from sort of the larger area. And so there are a number of different ways, even given these less dense areas, that there can be, stratifying mechanisms that, get put in place.

Lisa: And could you expand on that? How privatization of education maybe exacerbates the, segregation in school districts?

Erica: Right. And so privatization can encompass a lot of different forms. I guess I'll, I'll start by, sort of laying out how I think about what that even encompasses. Privatization can look like the formation of, um, well, it can be certainly going to private schools and that I'll say also has historical roots in that.

Going to private schools was a way that many white Southerners avoided school desegregation efforts in the sixties during the era of massive resistance. so there are still, for example, today in some of these particularly rural areas in the South, private schools that were founded for white students to avoid going to schools that would be, that would have higher percentages of Black students than them.

So that can be one form going to private schools. And we also now have some states enacting voucher legislation that can assist families in paying for private schools. We have charter schools, which are publicly funded schools, and they look different depending on state

legislation, every state. But to some extent they also have some privatization elements because they're typically not part of a school district.

And so they're, um, a choice alternative to the public school district. And when, students choose this at a differential rate, then that can overall create segregating effects. There are some states do allow for a choice between districts. If you can provide transportation, which again is, somewhat privatized in that you're privatizing the transportation versus relying on publicly provided bus transportation, for

example. so there really are a range of different ways in which, Choice or privatization are impacting who's considered part of the whole and who are available to desegregate with. And so in some places where there are still existing court desegregation orders, even sometimes charter schools, because they've had a segregating effect, have had to change their policies so that they don't impede district efforts to fully desegregate.

Lisa: Well, we know that privatization efforts have been a huge part of the policy landscape when it comes to education in the South. Are there any other patterns that we should keep an eye on when it comes to the education system?

Erica: Right. One of the topics I mentioned earlier was the fact that the South traditionally has had more countywide school districts, which can be a helpful foundation for crafting more effective desegregation policies. In the past couple of decades, we've seen an increase, particularly in the South of new school districts that are forming, that are breaking away from these larger county-wide districts to create smaller districts, which are often, homogenous and typically, are disproportionately wider and more affluent than the district that the communities are leaving.

And I would highlight this as a sort of factor to keep an eye on because this, redefining the sort of what the public is from this larger, more heterogeneous to smaller, distinct, homogenous groups, has real implications for the flow of resources as well as for the extent to which integration can occur.

And so, some of us have written about this and talked about this as sort of a, a new form of, succession that school districts are having. It's a way of using school district boundaries to, to create new dividing lines about who can go to schools, in which communities based on where you live and you can afford to live, which of course relates to a ongoing legacy of racial segregation.

So I think that this. Is a, a really important issue to keep an eye on. there could be something done at, at the state level to try to change the laws to prevent this from happening. The federal government could review proposed, new district formation to see whether it would have a segregating impact.

But certainly the extent to which new lines are being formed that will separate students and resources is something that is concerning for equity.

Lisa: Let me tell you, I am actually, so I'm in Florida and you mentioned Florida. That's one of the examples. So I've been like, Yeah. Uh, we do have, I, I went to a magnet school, Uh, so all of this is ringing a lot of, uh, a lot of the alarm bells and I'm already concerned about living in Florida and having a seven year old little sister going through the school system right now.

So, thank you for, uh,

Erica: Yeah.

Lisa: bringing these issues up. Now I have more things to share with my mother.

Erica: Well, I will say I, I grew up in southern Alabama, and my district didn't do a lot of things right. In fact, it did a lot of things wrong, um, which is why I got interested in this topic. But I went to a magnet school that was created, 25 years after they filed the initial desegregation case and they waited so long, trying to prevent any desegregation from happening, that they had to design it sort of according to what we knew to try to prevent all the bad things from happening. And so my magnet middle school was to this day, the most integrated experience in my life. And that is one example. It can be an example of using choice to integrate. It doesn't always happen, but it is an example of how choice can -- when it's designed with civil rights goals of mind, can, can help.

Lisa: So you mentioned court decisions earlier and there's definitely one that comes to mind. And it's pretty recent. You co-wrote an op-ed in the Hill with another researcher, Dr. Genevieve Siegel Hawley, um, addressing racial inequality and segregation in K through 12 schools, and you tied it to this recent Supreme Court ruling that overturned affirmative action.

Could you talk a little bit about how segregation in K through 12 classrooms connects to the Supreme Court ruling on college admissions?

Erica: Absolutely. We have been following this case, pretty closely for a couple of different reasons and thinking about what the implications are for, K-12 education. When I think of what was being considered by the Supreme Court, those were two universities' race conscious admission strategies for undergrad education.

And I should say, I did go to graduate school at Harvard, but not as an undergrad. These universities said that they wanted to consider because of the educational benefits of having racially diverse classrooms and the experiences they bring, how it enriches the educational environment they wanted to consider race among other factors in admitting a class.

And this is only used in, you know, a couple hundred, higher education institutions that have more applicants and they have slots available. Um, so this isn't what all universities do, just some. And what the Supreme Court did is they, um, prevented universities from using this, this measure. But why universities had been using this measure and they had been employing sort of some broader ones that have gradually, been done away with were because of the fact that our K 12 schools still provide

unequal experiences and opportunities that position students very differently when they're being evaluated by some of our most competitive public and private universities in the country. So, you know, Harvard rejects most of the applicants that they get, right. And often you have to have stellar test scores.

You have to have a lot of extracurricular activities. You have to have very strong grades and there are very unequal, access opportunities to those kinds of experiences that would position students well for a school like Harvard or even a public university like UNC that, again, has far more applicants than they have slots available, and so we really wanted to call attention to the fact that if we're taking away one of these tools that helped to assess students in part in comparison to what opportunities they had, then it's really important to think about what can we do to make sure that K 12 educational opportunities are more equitably distributed across racial lines?

So, The US Department of Education, for example, has done some reports that show that schools with very high percentages of Black and Latinx students, those students have much less access to AP courses. And having more AP courses can make you look like a stronger applicant in some of these competitive admissions processes.

So how can we provide, more equitable access to, to AP courses or, extracurricular activities or um, really well qualified, experienced teachers who can help students even think about what they need to do to be prepared to apply to some of these colleges or even know that some of these colleges exist.

You know, school counselors are very inequitably distributed across schools depending on things like student composition and segregation. So, so we really need to, if we're taking away tools from higher education, that in part could try to evaluate the extent of inequality that exists in K 12,

I think it's incumbent on us to think about how can we do a better job to provide more integrated K 12 experiences and more equitable access to these opportunities that really matter for students, learning, but also ability to get into some of these most competitive higher education opportunities.

Lisa: So I'd like to talk about policy changes that you wish to see in the years to come for racial desegregation in American schools, and also how current policies can be better implemented.

Erica: Yes, I think a lot about how could we, how could we change things to build a more integrated, equitable future. I think it's work that all of us, um, there's room for all of us in, in, in this effort. And so, I invite listeners to think about how they can do it, whether it's at their local level or thinking about more regional.

Or talking to their state or federal legislatures. So I think the good news is that there are lots of different things that we can try to do, uh, and working comprehensively on a solution. will, will take all of this. Let me just also, before I get to solutions though, one other challenge just to make this more complicated is that, there was a Supreme Court decision preceding the affirmative action decision.

15 years ago that limited voluntary integration efforts in K-12 schools.

And, and that's a really important decision for us to also just think about from the K 12 context because, you know, I already said that the number of districts that were being required by course to do things were slowly dwindling.

But they also then put some restrictions on what K 12 districts could even voluntarily do. And so, you know, I gave you the example of Louisville, Kentucky in the 1970s that had to merge with the county district. Well, in this 2007 decision, the Supreme Court actually limited what Louisville, as well as, uh, Seattle Public Schools were doing to voluntarily create more racially integrated, K 12 schools.

These districts had read the social science research, believed in the educational benefits of, uh, racial integration in Louisville's case. They had been through the long history of efforts to undo segregation. And they believed it was an important community value that they wanted to maintain.

And what happened was the Supreme Court said the way in which the school districts were considering students' race was impermissible. And so, Louisville actually went to sort of a, multifaceted thinking about both racial diversity as well as economic diversity of where kids live to try to maintain some integration. And so I mentioned that in thinking about what we can do, we've already had some voluntary efforts limited in K 12. Hopefully there will not be any effort to think that, what the higher ed decision means, hopefully will not affect K 12 voluntary integration efforts. But I think one important thing to keep our eye on is the extent to which, K 12 is still taking advantage of

the flexibility left under this 2007, uh, Supreme Court decision. So continuing to think about voluntary integration efforts, support school boards in saying this is an important value. There are educational benefits that social science shows of having racially and economically integrated schools. And we want our communities to think about this, whether it's if you have magnet schools in your community, thinking about how are magnet schools creating racially integrated, um, environments, or if school boundary lines are being

redraw, which they're done all the time for reasons that don't relate to race or segregation. Like, you know, there's a school in my community that's over capacity. My children's school is under capacity, so they're, they are considering whether to redraw some of the boundary lines. Well, when we redraw boundary lines, we can also redraw them and think about will this also help to further integration in our community? We can think about are there housing efforts that might support school districts? So school districts aren't doing this work alone, and there is right now, uh, a rule that the Biden administration is considering about how to affirmatively further fair housing that could help to support community in integration of housing.

That is also asking these community housing partners to think about the connection with education. So supporting those cross agency links in your community as well as the federal and the state level are critically important. I, I think too, you know, really thinking about, the choices we're making, how are we thinking about, policies?

So state, state level policies with respect to some of the choice and privatization that I mentioned earlier, are really critical. I think supporting racially diverse teachers can help us build on the benefits of racial integration or can help to advocate for it. I think there are a number of different ways that we can think about this.

The last thing I'll say is connecting integration efforts to some of the school resource issues is really important. So I talked earlier about how the schools that, racially and economically segregated are often schools that have fewer educational opportunities. This doesn't have to be the case.

And so I think really thinking carefully about, the future in terms of the students we're educating today will be our citizens of tomorrow. They will be contributing members of our workforce and how, you know, we really benefit when everyone has these rich opportunities and, and thinking about ways we can try to equalize funding, we can try to work more regionally on letting students, equitably cross boundaries if it will.

help to integrate schools and have more access for historically marginalized students. I think those are all ways that can be really important. I do think we need efforts from our federal government though, and, and we've seen some efforts from the Biden administration to respond in higher education in terms of the recent Supreme Court decision.

I think continuing to think about how we have tools like the Civil Rights Act that could, that was used in the 1960s to further desegregation can be, um, implemented in ways that I think today could help further, uh, desegregation in the 21st century. So I think we could think about ways of providing much more technical assistance.

There are over 10,000 school boards, and many of these people are voluntarily elected and providing support to them about why desegregation matters. What questions should you be asking when you're redrawing these boundary lines? What do you think about in terms of school

choice? All of these ways in which I think you know, state and federal governments can really provide more technical assistance and support to the local level in making decisions that would further integration, because I think there are many people who care about this issue and simply don't have the expertise or the time or the knowledge to be able to do this.

And this is certainly a place that social scientists can partner with their local districts to say, this is an issue I care about. Here are some tools that I have that would help your district and making decisions moving forward. And so I think there is room for all of us in doing this work together.

Lisa: Absolutely. And I, I really appreciate you sharing This issue is a multifaceted issue, especially when it comes to all of the different kinds of solutions that we need to implement in order to address, um, school segregation. So I appreciate you sharing, and I wanna ask if you have any closing thoughts

Erica: I have increasingly begun when I, when I teach about this to my students or, or talk about it to different groups, to connect this work that we're doing in, public education to sort of our democracy writ large. One of the rationales for the decision in in Brown in 1954 was because of the importance of educating future citizens and I do think that this is, democracy work that we're doing and thinking about, providing our children access and experiences with people who are different from their own lives, you know, that can help to enrich their empathy perspective taking and will help, uh, lead to our future citizens who will do the work of democracy across these multiracial lines.

That is our present and is our future. And so, we're at a time in which we see a pretty substantial demographic transformation taking place A across the US and our institutions at all levels are, are struggling to adapt to it. And I think what we invest in trying to make our public schools more equitable and integrated will have long-term effects for the future of our democracy.

Lisa: Thank you so much, Erica. And thanks for listening. For more on Professor Frankenberg's work, check out our show notes at scholars.org/nojargon. No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide organization that connects journalists, policy makers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy.

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