

3-10-2013

## Promote Equity, Excellence in our Region's Schools

Thomas J. Shields

*University of Richmond*, [tshields@richmond.edu](mailto:tshields@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/spcs-faculty-publications>

 Part of the [Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Other Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Shields, Thomas J. "Promote Equity, Excellence in our Region's Schools." Editorial. *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 10, 2013.

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Professional and Continuing Studies at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Professional and Continuing Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

## Looking Back, Moving Forward

# Promote equity, excellence in our region's schools

BY TOM SHIELDS, KIM BRIDGES, JOHN MOESER  
AND GENEVIEVE SIEGEL-HAWLEY

In a region that loves history, public anniversaries offer an opportunity to reflect on events that have shaped our collective present. This spring brings just such an occasion; it has been 40 years since the U.S. Supreme Court halted a federal court order mandating the consolidation of the Richmond public school district with the Chesterfield and Henrico districts. This action locked in city and suburban school boundaries - and associated inequities - that still exist.

Prior to the Supreme Court's action, Richmond's neighborhoods were segregated as a result of racially restricted post-WWII suburban growth, highway construction, slum clearance and urban redevelopment projects. In addition, discriminatory practices in the real estate and banking industries led to the red-lining of black and mixed-race neighborhoods, starving them for credit and fueling racial transition. As poor black neighborhoods expanded in the city, the white population left en masse for the suburbs. As a result, the city became primarily black, while suburban of Henrico and Chesterfield Counties became overwhelming white.

In our current era of rapidly shifting demographics, the school district boundaries set so many years ago no longer delineate divisions between black and white, rich and poor, city and county. Today, the growth of racially defined poverty spilling out from the urban core makes the student bodies of some county schools indistinguishable from those of city schools. Increasing diversity

across the region brings the opportunity for increasing diversity of our learning environments.



In area schools with mixed economic, racial, and/or cultural student populations, we often see diversity because we paused the movie and focused on a single frame. That frame captures the point when a school is midway through a demographic shift. Like any fast-paced movie, these schools can transition quickly from a scene of diversity to one of racial isolation. If history is any guide, without thoughtful and deliberate actions, schools with a rich mix of income, race, and nationality could fade away or never take hold.

In other schools across the region, however, diversity is far from the norm. Data from a forthcoming report by researchers at the UCLA Civil Rights Project reveal two important trends about schools in the Richmond region.

First, suburban (and, to a much lesser extent, urban) districts have undergone profound racial transformations in the past two decades, so much so that metropolitan segregation can be almost equally attributed to isolation within districts rather than between them.

Second, urban districts, such as Richmond and Petersburg, continue to report extremely high levels of overlapping segregation by both race and poverty. In 2010, more than one in three black students in the Richmond metro area attended an intensely segregated school (one that was 90-100 percent nonwhite). In the same year, three-quarters of students enrolling in intensely segregated settings were low-income.

### Want to attend?

The "Looking Back, Moving Forward" conference is free and open to the public. Registration is required at [sps.richmond.edu/moving-forward/index.html](http://sps.richmond.edu/moving-forward/index.html).



Sixty years of social science links schools segregated by race and poverty to a number of educational disadvantages. Doubly segregated settings are connected to less challenging and engaging curricula, high suspension and dropout rates, low-college attendance rates, high levels of teacher and staff turnover and inadequate resources.

Meanwhile, integrated schools are related to better educational outcomes, stimulating classroom discussion, more complex problem-solving, higher graduation rates, reductions in prejudice and an increased desire to attend diverse colleges and live in diverse neighborhoods later in life.

Perhaps most importantly, in an era of globalization, diverse learning environments best prepare our students for the world in which they will live and work.

While testing and accountability receive much attention, the importance of other factors that create a well-developed young person are often ignored. These noncognitive skills, such as the ability to collaborate, communicate, cooperate, and problem-solve with those whose backgrounds, cultures and experiences differ from our own, are essential in a flatter world.



A major conference co-sponsored by

Virginia Commonwealth University and the University of Richmond, titled "Looking Back, Moving Forward," convenes March 13 and 14 to establish a dialogue about the contemporary meaning of race, class and school boundaries in our metro area.

Members of the public can learn what scholars have discovered regarding trends in the region's schools and the importance of creating intentional diverse learning opportunities. They will also hear from educational leaders who have spearheaded innovations deeply connected to promoting diversity, excellence and equity in public schools. The conference will generate conversation that will help determine appropriate actions for our region's future.

In Judge Robert Merhige's 1972 ruling to consolidate the three school districts he noted, "The proof here overwhelmingly establishes that the school division lines between Richmond and the counties coincide with no natural obstacles to speak of." Four decades later, his conclusion still rings true. And in the continued absence of such "natural obstacles," it's not too late to create the diverse schools that today's students need to become the citizens who'll lead our region, our nation and our world.

Tom Shields is assistant professor, graduate education, at the School of Professional and Continuing Studies, University of Richmond. Kim Bridges is a government relations consultant for the Virginia School Boards Association and a former member of the Richmond School Board. John Moeser is senior fellow at the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement, University of Richmond, and professor emeritus of urban studies and planning, Virginia Commonwealth University. Genevieve Siegel-Hawley is assistant professor of educational leadership, Virginia Commonwealth University School of Education.