

Part IV: School Integration Role Play (40–50 minutes)

[NOTE: This activity has the potential for students to make racially insensitive remarks or perpetuate bias as students are asked to reflect their points of view about a school district that aims to create “racially balanced” schools. Before engaging students in this activity, consider the maturity and sophistication level of the students and the extent to which the conversation can go in a negative and potentially hurtful direction. If you do decide to conduct the activity, review the “ground rules” in your classroom and/or consult “[Creating an Anti-Bias Learning Environment](#).”

If you do not have time to implement Part IV, skip ahead to step #5 below to conclude this lesson.]

Time

40–50 minutes

Procedures

1. Tell students that for homework they will prepare to participate in a role play that will allow them to apply their ideas about school integration to a real-life situation. Distribute copies of [Case Study: Voluntary School Integration](#) and [School Board Meeting: Voluntary School Choice Plan](#). Explain that this fictionalized case study of a community struggling over its school integration plan is based on actual events. Instruct students to read both handouts and to prepare comments for a mock school board meeting that will take place in class the next day. Tell students that they will be participating in the role play as themselves, so their comments should reflect their actual viewpoints.

Optional: You may also wish to share with students the following resources, which provide an overview of the extent to which schools are segregated nationally and what impact this has on the educational experience for all students.

- [Social Science Findings about School Integration](#)
 - “[Choosing a School for My Daughter in a Segregated City](#)”
 - [Segregation Now: Investigating America’s Racial Divide](#) (Interactive website with a full text option)
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2. The next day in class, set up the role play by telling students they have been invited to a school board meeting to discuss Greenfield School District’s voluntary school choice plan. Point out that in light of the Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved*, many community members are questioning the legitimacy of the program and that this forum will provide an opportunity to hear from all sides before a vote is taken on whether or not to continue with the plan.
3. After setting the stage, designate a spot at the front of the room that will serve as the podium and invite student volunteers up to make their case one at a time. After each speaker, allow members of the audience to respond or to ask clarifying questions before inviting the next speaker up.
4. To close the meeting, have students vote on whether or not the plan should be eliminated, continued as is or continued with changes. Debrief by asking students what surprised them about the class discussion and voting results and whether or not they changed their thinking as a result of this exercise.
5. To conclude the lesson, ask students to reflect back on the interview of Minnijean Brown Trickey or Melba Pattillo Beals that they read/heard. Remind students that you initially asked them to bear in mind the experiences and perspectives of the “Little Rock Nine” as they considered the modern-day debate over school integration. Ask students how they think those students who were involved in the early days of school integration might view the current case and debate over school integration. Ask students if they think that the current decision, in Chief Justice John Roberts’ words, “is faithful to the heritage of Brown” or, in the words of dissenting Justices Stevens and Breyer, “rewrites the history of one of this court’s most important decisions” and “undermines Brown’s promise of integrated primary and secondary education.”

Case Study: Voluntary School Integration

Greenfield is a suburb of a large East Coast city. During the 1800s and early 1900s, Greenfield was a prosperous farming community, but decreasing agricultural opportunities left the town depressed after World War II. From the 1970s to the 1990s, Greenfield's white population dropped from 90% to 60% and a new population of predominantly working class black and Latino/a people moved in to escape rising housing costs in the neighboring city, where many of them work in service industries, including hotels and restaurants.

By 2000 Greenfield's neighborhoods were significantly segregated and eight of the town's twenty-two schools had a greater than 90% white enrollment. In response to the population change and increasing racial conflict, the Greenfield School District implemented a "voluntary school choice plan" with the goals of both desegregation and diversity in Greenfield schools.

Today the 13,000-student Greenfield School District has fourteen elementary schools, five middle schools, and three high schools. Roughly 45% of the district's students are white, 23% are African American, 26% are Latina/o, 4% are Asian, and the remaining 2% are multiracial or Native American.

For the purposes of the school choice plan, the Greenfield School District defined a public school as "racially balanced" if it was composed of between 40% and 70% students of color, keeping it within 15% of the people of color population in the general community. Schools with student of color populations above this range were defined as "racially imbalanced" while those below were defined as "racially isolated."

According to the school choice plan, students are initially assigned to schools in their neighborhoods, and race becomes a factor only when they (or their parents) request a transfer from the students' area school. All students are allowed to transfer as they like between "racially balanced" schools, and they can transfer to and from "racially imbalanced" or "racially isolated" schools when the transfer will help to promote racial balance. However, a transfer is not permitted if it would further segregate the "racially imbalanced" or "racially isolated" schools.

Through this method, approximately 5,500 Greenfield students (42% of the total student body) are assigned to non-neighborhood schools each year. About 200 transfer requests are denied—to both white students and students of color—in order to maintain racially balanced schools.

Since implementation of the school choice plan, race relations have improved, graduation rates are up and Greenfield's schools have performed better academically across the board. Despite these gains, a growing number of parents have complained that the plan is unfair and violates the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution by discriminating against students based on their race.

Following the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, a school board meeting was scheduled to discuss the benefits and shortcomings of the school choice plan, and to evaluate its validity in light of the Court's ruling.

School Board Meeting: Voluntary School Choice Plan

Questions for Consideration

1. What value, if any, do you place on going to a racially diverse school? What sacrifices are you willing to make to help ensure integrated schools?

2. Is there an important reason for the school district to deal with the issue of racial segregation or is this not a problem that schools are responsible for addressing?

3. In what ways does the school choice plan both benefit and limit students? Do the positives outweigh the negatives or vice versa?

4. Does the plan violate the rights of some students? If so, does it need to be eliminated or are there ways to change it to be more fair and in line with the law?

5. Are there ways to achieve diversity without categorizing students by race? Are there other aspects of diversity that need to be taken into account by the plan?

Speaking Legalese

The following are some of the issues that the courts take into account when considering cases that involve voluntary school integration plans.

Both the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment* of the U.S. Constitution and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964** require that policies involving race be subject to “strict scrutiny,” which is a test used by the courts to examine both the goals of a disputed policy and the way in which those goals are achieved. This standard is used to consider policies that discriminate against racial minorities as well as those designed to benefit them. To pass strict scrutiny, a law or policy must satisfy the following conditions:

- **Compelling Governmental Interest:** The policy must be justified by a “compelling governmental interest”—something necessary or crucial, as opposed to something merely preferred. “Governmental interests” include both attempts to deal with the effects of past discrimination as well as more forward-looking efforts to promote diversity. In either case, there must be a “strong basis in evidence” to prove a compelling interest, such as statistics, scientific reports or testimony from experts who can support the need for the policy.
- **Narrowly Tailored:** The policy must demonstrate a careful fit between the policy and the policy’s goal. It should not cover too much or fail to address enough. If there other ways to achieve the goal that do not involve categorizing people by race or that are “less restrictive,” then a policy is likely to be struck down as not being “narrowly tailored.”

*The Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibits states from denying any person the equal protection of the laws and says that a state must treat an individual in the same manner as others in similar conditions and circumstances.

**Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin in programs and activities receiving funds from the federal government.