

Choice and Diversity: Irreconcilable Differences?

A San Diego charter school offers advice about how to build a multicultural, high-achieving school of choice.

BY JEAN KLUVER AND LARRY ROSENSTOCK

Opponents of public school choice policies, particularly vouchers, see them as a recipe for resegregation of schools. Supporters of those same programs point out that wealthy parents, the vast majority of whom are White, already have choice and many have exercised it to live in communities with “good schools” or to opt out of the public school system altogether. They argue that public school choice programs simply extend this choice to low-income families, particularly Black and Latino families that are trapped in low-performing school districts because of residential segregation.

Whichever side one is on, most legal and public policy experts see choice and equity as trade-offs—to get more of one, you have to sacrifice some of the other. Samuel Issacharoff, desegregation specialist at Columbia Law School, put this general consensus most succinctly in comments to the *New York Times*: “You can’t reconcile choice with diversity, and that’s the tragedy. Fifty years after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, there is still no non-coercive mechanism for racial integration that has evolved in this country” (Rosen, 2000).

Yet parents of all races and classes want more choice in determining their children’s education, and a majority of parents (including those from the White middle class) say



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Academic internships that help students make adult world connections are a core element of High Tech High's design principles.

they value diversity in their children's education as well. Are they in denial? Are they disingenuous? Is it possible to have both? Certainly, in theory, increasing school choice could easily result in furthering the segregation that already exists. But we argue that there are many ways to structure public school choice programs to avoid this outcome. In fact, building small schools of choice, which intentionally bring together students of diverse races, ethnicities, and classes, may be one of the only effective ways to ensure that all students receive a high-quality, truly integrated educational experience.

Although we can't answer the question of whether choice increases segregation for all public schools, we can answer a different, related question: If you wanted to create schools of choice that successfully integrated students of diverse races, classes, and academic abilities, how could you do it? To help answer this question, we convened a multiracial group of students at the Gary and Jerri-Ann Jacobs High Tech High, a charter school in San Diego, CA, to talk

about race, class, and academic tracking in their school and in other public schools they had attended. Their discussion shows clearly how difficult it is to achieve real integration; how important it is for students; and how school structure, programs, and policies can have a great effect.

De Facto Segregation

Examining the effect of choice on integration obscures a larger issue: There has been a substantial resegregation taking place in the public schools already, with or without public choice programs. Gary Orfield has made this point clearly, pointing out that three quarters of Black and Latino students go to schools that are predominantly minority and the average White student goes to a school that is 80% White. A 1999 *New York Times* study found that Black students in all but three states were equally or less likely to have a White student in their class than they were 10 years ago (Rosen, 2000). Most recently, the Harvard Civil Rights Project measured integration in the form of an "exposure

index”—students’ exposure to students of other races—and found that Black students’ exposure to their White peers was static or decreasing in all but 4 of 185 districts studied, and White students’ isolation increased in 53 districts (Orfield & Yun, 1999). Our conversations with students suggest that these statistics may understate the extent of segregation. Many public schools that appear integrated on paper are actually internally segregated because of academic tracking, student and parent choices within schools, and other school policies.

The San Diego Unified Public School District is very diverse (about 39% Latino, 27% White, 16% Black, 8% Filipino, 6% Indochinese, and 2% Asian). Voluntary busing helps schools in mainly White residential areas achieve diversity, yet some of the most diverse schools remain internally segregated. School policies can reinforce this segregation, as do the kids themselves. According to student Jenny Kam, “At my old high school, kids hung out with kids like them—Asian with Asian, White with White—and people would say bad things about you if you didn’t.” Most of the other students shared this same experience. “All the kids hung out with their own race,” said Jasmine Ojeda. Star Kirkland described her former school as “all cliques. If you hung out with other people [outside your race], it was hard to find your place.”

The students pointed out that in their previous schools, academic tracking further segregated them. Ker Thao explained that “you get to know the students you are in class with, so if they do things that way [i.e., academic tracking], it works to segregate kids.” Jasmine Ojeda commented, “I was in the more advanced classes where most of the kids were White. My friends were more in the minority classes.” According to Anthony Conwright, “Separating the kids by who has the best scores and who has the worst can make the kids feel inferior. I don’t like to feel that I’m not as smart as the next kid.”

The discussion also revealed that school choice, school structure, and size, though usually directed at different goals, can also affect how integrated the school feels. David Madrid described the structure of his old high school as not conducive to getting to know anyone from different races: “When you have six periods a day of 40 minutes each, you don’t get to know anybody. You don’t even get to know your teacher very well! All you do is turn in your homework.”

Describing a potentially volatile racial incident that took place at High Tech High, students reflected on school size, flexibility, and culture. A student repeatedly came to school wearing a Confederate flag on his backpack. Many staff members and students talked with him about why the flag was offensive to them and asked him not to wear it. One day when he wore it, a Black girl ripped it off of his backpack. In response, the boy got a larger flag and waved it from his car, chasing buses full of mostly Black and Latino students. During the week that this boy was suspended and administrators deliberated on his possible expulsion, the

students became very polarized. Some thought he was exercising his right to free speech and was being unduly punished and the Black girl was getting off scot-free; others thought he was not being punished severely enough. E-mail messages and websites on both sides of the issue proliferated.

Anthony Conwright explained, “Curtis [a White boy] and I had an argument [about the flag incident] and I lost respect for him, but we agreed it would be a good idea to have a meeting where anyone could come to talk about opinions and feelings about race.” So they asked the principal [Rosenstock], and the meeting was held. “At my old school, if you tried to construct something like that, it wouldn’t work. They wouldn’t have a meeting that you asked for, and then even if they did, most of the kids wouldn’t come.” Jenny Kam added, “At other high schools, you wouldn’t see people going to school officials; you’d see someone getting hurt the next day.”

Four Steps to True Integration

High Tech High opened in 2000, the result of an unusual alliance between corporate leaders who were concerned about the education of future workers and educators who were committed to developing a new model of urban high school education. From the start, diversity was one of the school’s most important goals. The original business plan states that part of the school’s mission is “To increase the participation of educationally disadvantaged students in science, math, and engineering.” This was necessary because California had just passed Proposition 209, eliminating affirmative action in public higher education, which led to large reductions in the number of Black and Latino students being accepted in University of California schools and made it illegal for public schools to create a diverse student body through explicit racial balancing.

Yet the school is racially integrated—its student body roughly mirrors the racial composition of the school district as a whole and individual classes are very diverse. Admission to the school is by lottery, and in its first two years, achievement at the school, measured through standardized tests, has been very high. California ranks all public schools on a 1–10 academic performance index—the first score is raw and the second is adjusted for the economic and demographic makeup of the school. In its first year, High Tech High received 10 on both scores, the highest possible rank. Conversations with High Tech High students, faculty and staff members, and trustees pointed to the following four steps as necessary to building a truly diverse school: siting the school, recruiting students, building an academic program that supports diversity, and creating a school culture of integration and mutual respect.

Siting the School

San Diego, like most cities in the United States, is residentially segregated. To build a school in which students of all races felt comfortable, High Tech High’s founders looked for

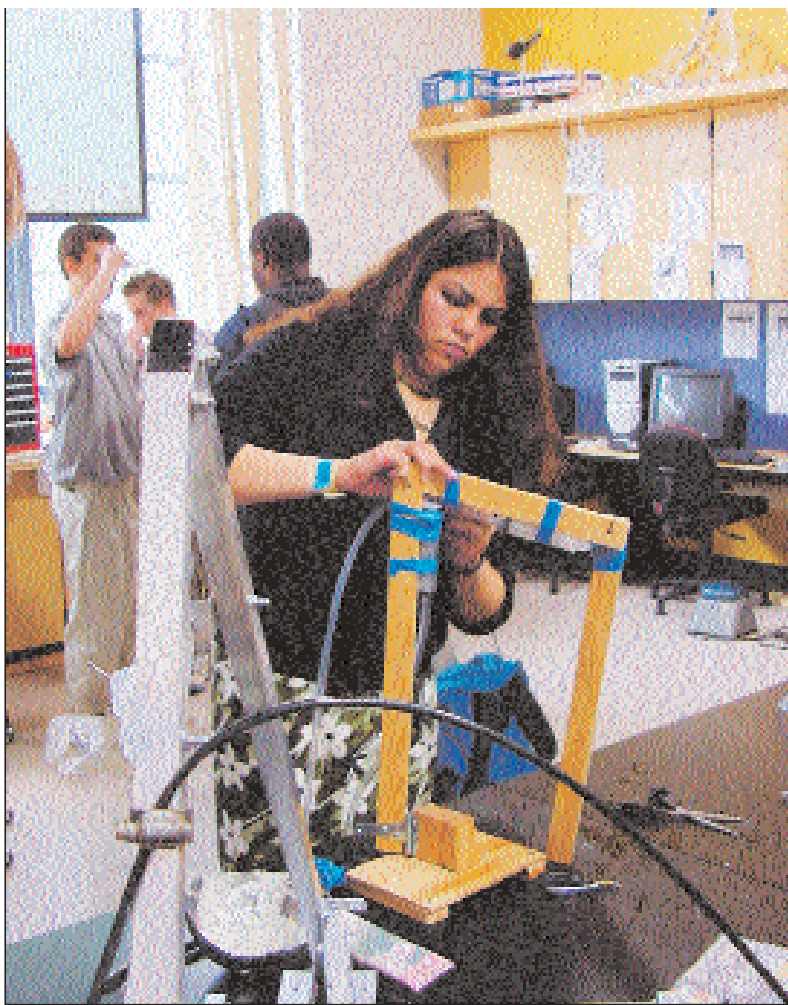


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Projects dictate much, but not all, of the curricula and fully engage students in their learning.

a racially neutral location, preferably downtown. That proved impossible, and the school settled on a series of buildings at the former Naval Training Center, which was slated for conversion to civilian use. Although in a predominantly White section of the city, it is outside any particular residential neighborhood, close to downtown San Diego, and an easy bus or trolley ride from most low-income neighborhoods.

Thus far, the location has worked as a means of sustaining diversity. Through a U.S. Department of Labor grant, bus service is offered to students coming from low-income, mostly Black and Latino neighborhoods, and students living in higher-income parts of the city make it to school on their own. As long as the school remains a high-performing, desirable place to go to school, White middle-class parents and their children will work out ways to get there.

Although this formula has worked well for High Tech High, it raises the obvious question of how to construct such diverse schools of choice in predominantly low-income neighborhoods. We don't have an answer. One widely used approach is to create magnet schools designed to attract White middle-class students into lower income, minority neighborhoods through curricular focus or other differentiation. Although we have not seen any data on this, our observation of these schools over the years is that they start out diverse, but that White parents' racism, fear, and search for like peers for their children ultimately win out over any

curricular or educational preferences, and the racial composition of these schools eventually returns to that of the neighborhood or the magnet program becomes a White enclave.

Equitable Admissions: Choice, Outreach, and Lottery

Because of the school's high profile and its corporate backing, its founders felt sure they would have no trouble attracting students from educated White families (particularly boys, given the school's name and focus on math and science). During the planning year, outreach focused on recruiting Black, Latino, and female students. The year before the school opened, a free summer program was offered to students from two middle schools in low-income neighborhoods. Most of those who completed the summer program applied to the lottery two years later when they were ready to enroll in high school. Each year, the staff continues to do outreach to middle schools in low-income neighborhoods, meeting with parents, administrators, and guidance counselors. And the first cohort that originated from the summer program continues to generate many applications by word-of-mouth from family members and friends.

Charter schools in California are required to admit students by lottery, but they are also supposed to mirror the race and ethnic composition of their district. Moreover, Proposition 209 has now made it illegal to construct a racially weighted lottery that would ensure such an outcome. But the city of San Diego (like most others in California) is so geographically segregated that racial criteria are unnecessary to promote diversity in admissions: ZIP codes do perfectly well. Because High Tech High's first year's test scores have been publicized, more and more applications from White middle-class families have been coming in, so applications are now tagged by ZIP code, and a lottery process has been developed to create a student body that represents all areas of the city and, incidentally, represents all racial and ethnic groups.

Despite the lottery, there is still a self-selection bias inherent in such a system. Although the school is racially and economically diverse, it most certainly represents students and families "in the know" who are reading the papers, and listening to other parents and students talk about school choices and who have the organization and wherewithal to fill out an application in January or February—a full eight months before the next school year starts. One solution to this problem might be to randomly assign some portion of enrollment to students who did not apply, who could, of course, withdraw if they were not interested. Although such a plan would offer more equity, it could also undermine the atmosphere of choice—that is, that each

student has chosen to be there and sees it as a privilege, which is an important element of the school culture. As student David Madrid explained, “When you go to a school of 1,200, where you have to be there and you’re just waiting until 2:10, it’s a whole different thing from coming to a place where it’s a cool new thing and you want to be part of it. It sets a different tone.”

Size, Structure, Program

Real integration requires much more than just enrolling a diverse student body. Many of a school’s choices about size, structure, program, and teaching have a great effect on how multicultural a school is, on the academic achievement of students of color, and on how much the school feels “owned” by students of all races.

High Tech High’s program was built upon three principles: personalization, adult world connection, and common intellectual mission. According to the school’s trustees and faculty and staff members, each one of these has an important effect on issues of diversity. *Personalization* means that each student is part of a small advisory group and keeps the same adviser throughout his or her school career. Students develop a personal learning plan and create a digital portfolio in which their best work is showcased. As Rob Riordan, a staff member of High Tech High Learning explained, “The best way for us to show we value diversity is to truly support the intellectual development of each student; when students have a voice in determining their own learning and creating their own projects, they are able to express who they are, including their race or ethnicity, their sexual identity, and their values and interests.”

The second principle, *adult world connection*, is implemented through internships, projects based in the community, and the constant presence of community members in the school. Scientists and industry experts sit on panels to comment on students’ presentations; professionals of every stripe are invited to “power lunches” during which they talk about their field and answer students’ questions. When students show a particular interest, outside experts are recruited to teach electives on a voluntary basis. This principle was adopted for academic reasons—to make learning relevant, and avoid the “what’s the point” question that dogs most high school study.

But as Rebecca Haddock, the associate principal for student affairs, points out, all these elements, especially internships, have a particularly strong effect on low-income students and minority students: “It’s all about access. Internships give these students access to people, workplaces, and organizations they would not otherwise have. They end up having mature, mutually respectful relationships with people who students feel are doing ‘real work.’” As student Devoree Locke said, “I never knew Black people worked as lawyers in downtown law firms. That gave me confidence that I could, too, if I wanted to.”

Ben Daley, the associate principal for academic affairs, explained the third principle, *common intellectual mission*, by

contrasting High Tech High with other schools: “In most big public high schools, about 15% of the kids have a map of where they are going and what they are learning in school. These are the same kids that take the AP classes and end up going to Brown, and most of them are White.... At High Tech High, we want *all* the kids to have this kind of map—we talk about the school’s learning goals and habits of mind all the time because we want the process to be transparent to them.” (The five habits of mind—perspective, supposition, evidence, relevance, and significance—were coined by Deborah Meier at Central Park East Schools as a way to stimulate and codify critical thinking.)

Daley continued, “Your typical A student at a regular public high school knows why they got an A—they made a hypothesis, proved their point, said why it was important, and probably even included what others have said about the same issue. But the other students don’t even have a clue about what makes up an A paper. Here at High Tech High we want everybody to know exactly what it takes to do good work. That’s what the common intellectual mission is all about.”

Common intellectual mission also means no tracking. During the school’s first year, there was great conflict among the faculty members about whether to institute an honors program. Parents (and some kids) were pushing hard for an honors track, and faculty members wanted to ensure that the school was intellectually challenging to all its students. In a related matter, math teachers were seeing vastly different math abilities among their students and struggling with how much to separate students. After much discussion and analysis, the faculty developed the current honors option: All students take the same classes, and if they want honors credit, they are required to do more in-depth independent work. In the math controversy, the faculty looked at how students would be separated if the proposed math levels were implemented and saw that such a separation would lead to academic and racial segregation across the board. As a result, they have stayed with mixed-level classes and added more individual and small-group tutorials.

Faculty members admit that inside the classroom, it is a challenge to teach students with such a wide range of past experiences in schools. But as Daley explained, “That’s the challenge we have set for ourselves, and we think it’s worth it. In my physics and robotics classes, I have noticed that when my teaching is most traditional, I think...‘How can I possibly teach this range of students?’ But when my teaching is more project-based, these problems seem to melt away.”

The size of the school is important as well—many of these principles would be impossible to put into practice in a school of 2,000 students. Small schools make authentic, mutually respectful relationships among students of different races and between students and teachers possible. As one

student remarked, “It allows us to really care about each other like a big family.” Keeping a school small is financially challenging and takes great commitment. When High Tech High was in its planning stages, budget projections showed that the school would be much more financially feasible if it enrolled 900–1,200 students, and there was great pressure on the founders to open up the opportunity to more kids. But as Trustee Chair Gary Jacobs explained, “Had we opened with 1,200 students, we would have lost the personalization that is so important. Instead, we decided to open a series of small schools. We’ll get to the 1,200 kids eventually, but one school at a time.”

Culture of the School

Most schools have a palpable culture that can be felt immediately upon walking through the front doors. Some feel like police states, and others feel like communities of mutual respect. High Tech High students and staff members talked about the various things that make up a school’s culture. Student Star Kirkland said, “The kinds of things we do in class, working on interactive projects with other people, allow us to meet and work with people that we wouldn’t otherwise get to do.” Student Jasmine Ojeda added, “You work with people for a long block of time—80 minutes, so you have a lot more to do with them.”

Student Ker Thao mentioned the weekly community meetings: “They give us a chance to get together as a whole school and talk about things that are going on as a school.... It gives us a sense of being a community.” Rebecca Haddock, the associate principal, noted the importance of supporting students’ leadership. “Most of our community meetings now are led by kids. We held a multicultural day, kind of a healing experience, after the Confederate flag incident, and that was entirely planned and led by students. We’ve even got students teaching electives.”

Finally, students and staff members stressed that the element of choice makes High Tech High’s culture very different from a typical high school. During the application process, parents and students come to a meeting together; while parents meet in one room, students go to another and write a statement about why they want to attend High Tech High—which gives them an opportunity to say that they don’t want to be there but are being pushed by their parents. The result is a student body that’s willing to respect one another and work together. As student David Madrid (who teaches an elective) said, “School is what you make it.



PHOTO BY DAVID STEVEN

Visitors are almost always awed by the vibrant and prolific student art that fills the school.

I could have went to [his neighborhood high school] and hung out with the gangbangers and ditched school. I just said I want to make something better.”

Ultimately, a school’s culture is an outgrowth of its purpose, location, admissions process, program and structure, and participants’ choices. To some degree, culture can be engineered, but it always calls upon the commitment, hope, persistence, and will of the participants. Perhaps the best we can do at this point is create small learning communities that are structured to combine choice and equity. Small schools, such as High Tech High, show what is possible, but for them to be pervasive in the culture, we need public policy commitments in other areas as well.

From the Ground Up

To paraphrase Deborah Meier, there is no panacea for public education; it has to be fixed one small school at a time. Public policy can’t make good schools from the top down, but it can remove obstacles so educators, parents, and community members can build them from the bottom up. For small schools of choice like High Tech High to flourish, public policy makers need to address the following issues:

- Education is costly. In San Diego, the average per-pupil cost is about \$7,600; charter high schools receive about \$5,600 per pupil, and elementary and middle schools receive even less. Most voucher programs provide about \$3,000 or less per pupil, virtually mandating that they can only be used at religious schools that depend upon subsidies from religious communities and teachers who work

for subsistence pay. The greatest financial obstacle for charter schools is facilities. Although there have been some promising policy advances on this front, more work is needed to create better financing mechanisms, parallel to bonding, to make charter schools feasible.

- It has been said many times, but still bears repeating, that schools are asked to redress all of the inequalities created by the rest of society. Policies that promote affordable, integrated housing, livable wages, and a negative income tax would go a long way toward making schools more equitable and students more successful.
- A thorough commitment to small schools of choice has important education policy implications. Such programs as special education, bilingual education, and vocational

education were each created to help public schools reach underserved kids. Yet now, especially in the context of large public high schools, these same programs function to segregate students and polarize adults because they represent funding streams and jobs. In small, personalized, intentionally integrated schools, all of these students can be served as part of the mainstream—and usually served better.

- Small schools are often resented as privileged, boutique solutions, and the question remains about how to take them to scale. Removing the obstacles that inhibit the creation of new schools is one strategy, but most high schools are big and all of them can't be replaced by charters or vouchers. Instead, increased funding can enable school leaders to break these schools down into smaller units, which can also function as schools of choice. Although this may not seem financially feasible because of the economics involved, the California School Redesign Network at Stanford University has shown in a study of staffing and expense patterns of small and large schools that on the contrary, economies can be realized in small schools, as well as higher quality. Side-by-side budget and schedule comparisons for small and large schools can be found on the California School Redesign Network's website (www.stanford.edu/dept/suse/csrn/resources/samples/staffing/index.html) (See also Lawrence, Bingler, Diamond, et al., 2002).
- If integration in public education by race and class is truly a goal, public education policy can insist that schools of



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The commons, a flexible space designed for small group work and informal meetings, is a perfect space for collaborative work.

choice achieve it. The High Tech High experience shows that choice and diversity do not have to be in conflict. Outreach, siting, transport, lottery structure, as well as the internal academic program all play key roles, and charter granting authorities or voucher-issuing entities can require that all of these issues are addressed in charter schools or voucher programs. With the right parameters and adequate supports, the dream of a “noncoercive mechanism for integration” can be achieved. PL

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Jean Kløver (jkløver@san.rr.com) is a member of the Board of Explorer Elementary Charter School.

Larry Rosenstock (lrosenstock@hightechhigh.org) is principal of Gary and Jerri-Ann Jacobs High Tech High and the former director of the New Urban High School Project.