

# Introduction

ON A LATE OCTOBER DAY in 2016, not too long before I read aloud my letter to Posey in Richmond, more than one hundred educational stakeholders from across the country converged in a large, well-lit room at the US Department of Education to talk about creating and sustaining diverse, equitable schools through voluntary integration. I was there as an education researcher, graduate of racially diverse K-12 schools, former teacher in apartheid schools, and member of the National Coalition on School Diversity, a cosponsor of the event. Everyone was seated together at oversized round tables; mine was filled with school leaders from several large Virginia and Maryland districts. It was just weeks before the election.

During an afternoon question-and-answer session, former US Secretary of Education John King described school integration as the only educational reform that could heal the divisions laid bare by the Trump and Clinton presidential campaigns. He was reiterating and expanding upon remarks he'd been making throughout his brief tenure as the top school official in the country, statements that lifted up the power of diverse schools to develop the bonds necessary for fruitful workforce and civic participation.<sup>1</sup>

Secretary King's statements were rooted in interdisciplinary research that showcases the significant cognitive, social, emotional, and civic benefits related to diverse schools. In these settings, particularly when well designed, students of all backgrounds experience a robust exchange of ideas, experiences, and viewpoints. This builds critical,

flexible thinking and creative problem solving.<sup>2</sup> Early contact with other groups in racially diverse schools can also cultivate friendships across racial, ethnic, and cultural lines—meaningful relationships that help combat bias and stereotyping.<sup>3</sup> As King reminded us, in a society heading toward rule by a plurality of racial groups, rather than domination by a single majority, diverse schools promote crucial skills for the twenty-first-century workforce and for a cohesive, well-functioning democracy.<sup>4</sup>

From that October meeting in Washington, DC, a modest but symbolically significant \$12 million federal grant grew wings. It was called Opening Doors, Expanding Opportunities, to be awarded to up to twenty districts, or consortia of districts, interested in planning to increase diversity in their schools. Funds would support community engagement, data analysis, the development of diversity goals, and piloting activities in districts that qualified for school improvement grant funding.<sup>5</sup> As of January 2017, at least twenty-six districts had indicated they would apply.<sup>6</sup>

Both the convening and the grant would come to represent the remarkable culmination—for now—of a federal executive branch push to highlight the importance of diversity in public schools. Remarkable because it had been decades since the federal government had explicitly acknowledged the creation and sustenance of integrated schools as a policy goal. Culmination because shortly after its announcement, the incoming Trump administration swiftly discontinued the grant on the grounds that it was not a smart use of taxpayer dollars—though the department spokesperson was careful to say it did not reflect the administration's commitment to school diversity.<sup>7</sup>

The lack of sustained federal attention has not been because K-12 integration was widely achieved in the wake of the landmark 1954 *Brown* decision outlawing separate but equal schooling. Far from it. In fact, on the sixty-sixth anniversary of *Brown*, the Government Accountability Office, at the request of two top Democratic congressmen, released a detailed national analysis of contemporary school segregation and its consequences.<sup>8</sup> The findings were stark and damning. Between 2000 and 2013, the number of students attending schools in which

more than 75 percent of students were low income and black or Latinx more than doubled to 8.4 million.<sup>9</sup> Racial and economic polarization also was evident: 16 percent of all public schools in the United States served high concentrations of racial minorities and students in poverty, while another 16 percent served low concentrations.<sup>10</sup> These figures mattered because they are closely related to educational opportunities. Schools with high percentages of students of color and students in poverty were much less likely to offer advanced math or science classes and AP courses. They further were characterized by high rates of exclusionary discipline.

Crucially, the release of the report itself, along with several proffered remedies, offered additional affirmation of growing federal interest, this time from the legislative branch, in acknowledging and tackling school segregation after so many years of neglect. Action on both the executive and legislative fronts during the later years of the Obama administration was spurred by heightened media attention and renewed advocacy around school segregation.

The Trump administration's subsequent retrenchment is not the first time opposing forces have halted forward progress on desegregation at the federal level. Indeed, concerted federal implementation of *Brown's* integration mandate ended almost as swiftly as it began. After more than a decade of Southern intransigence, the threat of losing funds in the wake of executive enforcement of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, coupled with desegregation guidelines and tools outlined by the Supreme Court in 1968 and 1971, respectively, yielded notable declines in segregation for black and white students in the de jure South.<sup>11</sup> But before that same progress could reach the de facto segregated North and West, a politically transformed Supreme Court dealt a crushing blow to the future of metropolitan school desegregation.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Right Time and Place to Revisit Integration**

It's fitting that a look at contemporary school integration efforts—the subject of this book—examines what is happening in Richmond, Virginia, a city and state where pivotal battles over desegregation took place and where demographic shifts are creating new opportunities for

diversity within and among districts. The schools profiled in this book, as well as others across the United States that I will point out along the way, stand as important examples of bottom-up workarounds to a long history of legal, political, and social pressure to maintain school segregation.

Progress in Richmond, like the rest of the country, has been halting and slow. It was white leaders in Virginia who led the South during the late fifties and throughout the sixties in fighting *Brown v. Board of Education* viciously and effectively. Alongside damaging rhetoric and overt attacks splashed across editorial pages, Virginia delayed desegregation with tactics like public school closures, private school vouchers for white families, and a state-operated pupil placement board, which allowed just a handful of black students to integrate white schools in Richmond and elsewhere in the state.<sup>13</sup> By the late sixties and early seventies, as federal courts considered school desegregation remedies for Richmond—and countless other central city systems across the nation—government-backed residential segregation posed immense logistical challenges to integration between the largely black urban and predominately white suburban school districts.<sup>14</sup>

In 1971, correctly anticipating the landmark *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* ruling permitting the use of busing to sever the link between residential and school segregation, federal district court Judge Robert Merhige ordered cross-town transportation in the city of Richmond.<sup>15</sup> For the first time since *Brown*, all Richmond city students, black and white, were subject to the requirements of a desegregation order. Six months later, plaintiffs, now joined by the Richmond school board, returned to court requesting the merger of Richmond, Henrico, and Chesterfield schools to expand desegregation beyond Richmond's predominately black school enrollment.<sup>16</sup> Judge Merhige agreed with the plaintiffs, ordering the city-suburban consolidation on January 10, 1972.

But it was not to be.

As I wrote to Posey, a year later, in a 4–4 tie, the Supreme Court let stand an appellate decision overturning the Richmond-Henrico-Chesterfield merger. And one year after that, in 1974, the Supreme

Court issued a nationally binding decision in *Milliken v. Bradley*. The 5–4 ruling similarly engaged the issue of desegregating schools across the city-suburban boundary line, this time in the Detroit area, but breaking the tie that split the court in the Richmond case meant the decision applied to metro areas around the country. *Milliken* erected a national wall between city and suburban schools, effectively prohibiting meaningful and stable school desegregation from taking hold in most communities.

During my twelve years as a white student in Richmond’s city schools, the overall white enrollment in the system hovered around 10 percent. And it still does. Persistent segregation today, in Richmond and elsewhere, highlights the lack of political will to voluntarily do what the courts backed away from ordering—and what the Opening Doors, Expanding Opportunities grant was trying to incentivize: help communities overcome balkanized metropolitan spaces to ensure that children have access to equal educational opportunity. The ongoing struggle to do so highlights the need to revisit the principle of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “single garment” and what we want our public schools to do for our kids and our society.

Public schools play an utterly essential role in stitching that garment together. Attended by roughly nine out of ten students in the United States, public education is the communal institution that many of us encounter first, and for the most sustained period of time. In an age of standards, accountability, and market-based choice reforms, it is easy to forget that we designed public schools to serve both the advancement of individual students *and* society as a whole. As the unanimous decision in *Brown* declared:

Today, education is . . . required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any

child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.<sup>17</sup>

*Milliken's* retreat from the vision of public education outlined by *Brown*—along with the comprehensive school desegregation that vision required—unraveled much of our single garment.

### Today's "Patchwork" Communities and Local Support for Integration

Yet in metro areas around the country, a "patchwork metropolis" has emerged, as young, affluent, and largely white professionals flock to some city neighborhoods and as racial diversity and poverty mushroom in the suburbs.<sup>18</sup> In terms of sheer numbers, more people in poverty now live in the suburbs than in the cities. Some of the growth can be explained by migration from cities to suburbs, but it can also be understood as aftershocks from the Great Recession, with families struggling to maintain a toehold in the middle class. Racial and economic divisions remain extremely intense, hence the patchwork, but taken together, these changes may represent a window of opportunity for the 80 percent of Americans—and their children—who reside in metropolitan communities.<sup>19</sup>

Against the backdrop of our patchwork metros, mutuality in the form of school integration represents a path forward. Too few studies in recent years have called attention to what's working when it comes to fostering school integration. Yet, as demographic change renders schools across metropolitan communities temporarily diverse, helping practitioners and policy makers understand how to intentionally harness and stabilize that diversity becomes increasingly urgent. And while federal executive branch leadership on school integration has receded, at least temporarily, there is much that states and metros can do to further opportunities for diverse and equitable schooling.

The Richmond area offers up a Southern example of a community that left its city-suburban boundary lines intact—like the vast major-

ity of metros nationwide. Yet Richmond's contemporary city, suburban, and exurban communities are shifting, subject to what scholar Amy Stuart Wells calls "metropolitan migrations."<sup>20</sup> As prior distinctions and divisions blur, and as the Richmond community continues to wrestle with the intertwined legacies of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, a new generation of local stakeholders is purposefully supporting diverse schools.

### About This Book

This book will explore the leadership, policies, and practices surrounding efforts to promote twenty-first-century school integration. It does so through the lens of four Richmond area schools committed to the work of mutuality through racial and economic integration. The four schools encompass preprimary, elementary, middle, and high school, and range from urban to suburban to regional. All reflect intentionality around bringing diverse groups of students together to benefit children and communities. Integration doesn't happen by accident; it takes strong leadership and carefully designed policies and practices to bring it to fruition. School fieldwork and roughly fifteen in-depth, semistructured interviews with stakeholders at each school, including past and present leadership, faculty, families, and students, are layered onto an exploration of segregation in a metropolitan milieu.

*A Single Garment* brings an interdisciplinary understanding of old and new research related to the legal, political, policy, social psychology, and sociological issues surrounding school integration. It merges questions around external integration considerations like student assignment policy, housing policy, diversity goals for students and teachers, outreach and marketing, and transportation with internal integration ones like how students are assigned to classrooms and how families are engaged, who gets access to what curricula and which teachers, how often students experience cooperative activities, and how racial tensions are arbitrated and discipline meted out. Generally, school stakeholders were asked to reflect on the opportunities and challenges created by diverse schools. By exploring both the internal and external dynamics of school integration, it's possible to see what it would take to

reproduce various successes in certain schools across broader systems of schooling.

A word about terminology. In a nod to our contemporary lexicon, I'll often use the phrase "diverse schools," or "diverse and equitable schools," to describe school integration. But I also use the word "integration" with intention—and with an eye toward our troubled history of school desegregation. Dr. King famously outlined the difference between desegregation and integration in his 1962 speech "The Ethical Demands of Integration." He spoke of desegregation as "eliminative and negative," a short-term goal of removing "legal and social prohibitions" to racial contact and equality. Integration, in King's mind, was more long term, involving "the welcomed participation of Negroes in the total range of human activities" or "genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing."<sup>21</sup> Put differently: the removal of barriers to racial desegregation, accompanied by proactive strategies to achieve numerical diversity in schools, is a precondition for integration—but it is only the beginning of the work needed to dismantle the "otherness" that segregation helped create. Many of the external, or outward-facing, policies and strategies employed by the four schools studied move them closer to the goal of numerical diversity. Once attained, internal, or inward-facing, leadership, practices, and structures help prod them along the continuum of school integration toward what Berkeley professor John Powell calls "true integration."<sup>22</sup>

Importantly, *A Single Garment* engages school integration across diverse circumstances. Through the analysis of the four schools, readers will understand how our urban, suburban, and metropolitan contexts have shifted over the past several decades and what those shifts mean for diverse and equitable schooling. As such, the reader will come to see that these four schools operate within broader systems of metropolitan inequality. A unique feature of this book is that it doesn't consider leadership in isolation from policy, or system-level issues like student assignment as separate from within-school ones like tracking. The work of weaving together the single garment, in other words, involves both external and internal school integration—and our four schools are working hard to address both dimensions. I draw details

from my own experiences as a white student, parent, and professor into the book at times to further illustrate how some of these dynamics play out. It's my hope that the scope of the book renders it pertinent to a broad audience of students, parents, teachers, leaders, and policy makers concerned with advancing equal educational opportunity in the twenty-first century.

The basic argument is this: to move forward together as a multiracial, functioning, and fair democratic society, we must see public schools as central to weaving together our single garment. More than ever, this means collectively creating and maintaining a commitment to diverse, inclusive schools—and seeing them as institutions that benefit all children in deeply important ways. It means understanding how individual choices help create systems of equity or inequity and how those choices are shaped by systems. It means working to support and connect all kids as they walk through the main door of the building together, and also as they walk through classroom doors together. Relatedly, it means understanding that the work of meaningful school integration is continuous and complex.

*A Single Garment* proceeds as follows. The first chapter presents relevant research and theory surrounding mutuality in the form of school integration. It engages literature from multiple disciplines and sectors to answer a central question: why does school integration matter? This material lays the groundwork for understanding the choices and priorities of the four schools presented in subsequent chapters.

Chapters 2 through 5 serve as portraits of Sprout, Ecoff, Binford, and CodeRVA's efforts to foster integration amid segregated systems. Note that each of the four school-related chapters unfolds in the same basic order: a discussion of the dynamics of school segregation in preschool, urban, suburban, or regional contexts; an exploration of the origins stories related to the four schools; and finally, an analysis of the external and internal integration work at each site.

We'll see how leaders navigated complex and sometimes opposing demands to create a socioeconomically diverse preschool at Sprout—and later how the faculty drew on its own racial diversity to create better experiences for students. We'll examine how housing policy influences

school policy at suburban Ecoff, where a racially and economically diverse enrollment hinges on empathic, inclusive leadership and an attendance boundary that encircles—at least for the moment—a wide variety of neighborhoods and families. Within Ecoff, an emphasis on social and emotional learning (SEL) offers regular opportunities to learn and dialogue about the single garment. We'll then take a look at Binford Middle's rapid growth and rising diversity, guided by a leader strongly committed to its new arts integration focus and to serving a group of students reflective of the city. We'll also peek into its past, examining a trajectory that included my own middle school experiences there in the early 1990s. And finally, with CodeRVA, we'll zoom out to capture the ongoing importance of metropolitan efforts to integrate students. An emphasis on high-demand, innovative programming, workforce development, and equity brought together a powerful coalition, led by area superintendents, that culminated in the opening of the Richmond area's first regional magnet school.

The final chapter in *A Single Garment* looks across the four cases to synthesize key themes related to the leadership, policies, and practices that support intentionally diverse schools. This chapter underscores the ways in which internal and external integration are interwoven and discusses how to systematically extend school-based accomplishments. The book's core contention—that mutuality in the form of school integration must become a national goal—is revisited, along with the role of local, state, and federal policy makers in advancing that goal.

As recent and distant history indicates, with political will, progress can be swift. In the end, I hope readers will more clearly understand each child's success in the way I've come to understand my daughter's: as bound up in another's success, and as rooted in the forward movement of a healthy, democratic society.