

LEARNING TOGETHER

An occasional series on efforts to address segregation

4. Experts on their own experience, teens take action on integration

Students see themselves being subjected to all kinds of racial and economic sorting. And they are increasingly using their perspectives to take activist roles.

– Arthur



Caption

Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff

TWO WAYS TO READ THE STORY

• QUICK READ

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NEW YORK

No one is standing at the school door telling students they aren't allowed in because of the color of their skin. But teenagers in the Big Apple and beyond see all kinds of racial and economic sorting of students, and they're declaring, "Separate is still not equal."

Recent graduate Muhammad Deen says his Brooklyn high school, where just 1 percent of students are white, didn't have a college counselor on staff. His Advanced Placement biology class went without a permanent teacher for months after a stray bullet flew through the school and the original teacher quit.

"Educational disparities are basically stealing the future of some of these children away," says Mr. Deen, a member of the student-led group Teens Take Charge. "We want a seat at the table now. We're the ones being directly affected."

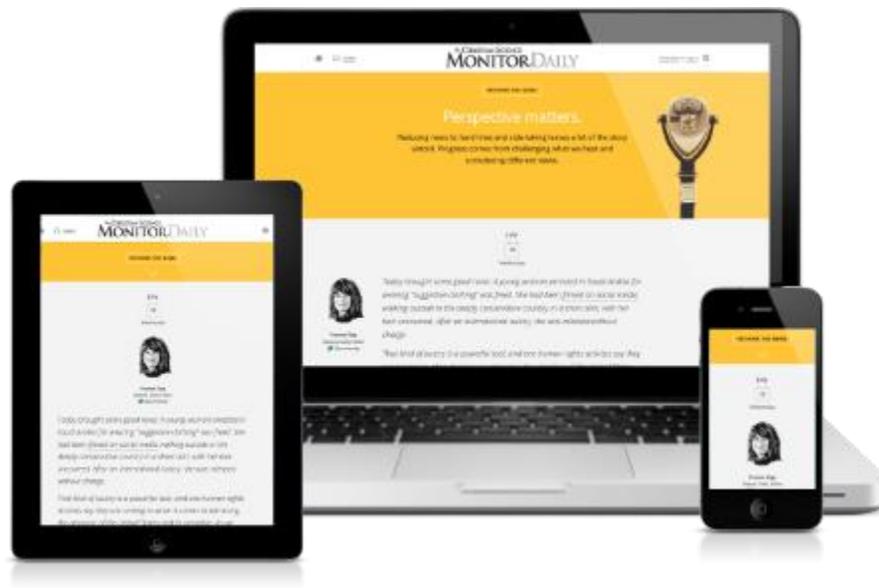
While less visible than the Parkland, Fla., teens taking on gun violence, the student-led integration movement offers another example of how young activists are earning respect as experts on their own experience. Students are elbowing their way into school decisionmaking spaces. And a growing number of adults are eagerly positioning themselves as allies in students' quest for equity.

The New York students aren't just seeking a wider mix of students from different backgrounds in their schools. They're also demanding what student activist group IntegrateNYC has dubbed the 5 R's of Real Integration: addressing race in enrollment, resource distribution, relationships within schools, restorative justice, and representative staffing that more closely mirrors student diversity.

"We're the new face of integration," says Leanne Nunes, a rising high school junior in the Bronx and director of equity at IntegrateNYC. "It's still about desegregation, but we plan on doing it way better," she says, sitting cross-legged on a stage after speaking at the Reimagining Education summit at Teachers College, Columbia University, where educators from around the country learn best practices for working in diverse environments.

That promise gives hope to Teachers College professor Amy Stuart Wells, who has found in her research that not enough thought was given to students' experiences as schools integrated after the landmark 1954 Brown v. Board Supreme Court decision.

“The educators – who were mostly white, because we fired most of the black and Latino teachers [when schools desegregated] – weren’t prepared to help student grapple with issues of race,” she says.



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Marches, lawsuits, conversations

Today, students are insisting that people try to understand their daily lives. On the May 17 anniversary of Brown, Teens Take Charge persuaded 28 public officials to spend a day in their shoes to inform the range of school diversity plans the city is crafting.

IntegrateNYC held a march for school integration in May 2017, billed as the first of its kind since 1964. The city had been identified in a report as one of the worst in terms of isolating students racially and economically.

About 250 students have been involved in advocacy work this year with IntegrateNYC, which helped file a class-action lawsuit in June against the school district. It alleges that black and Latino high-schoolers here are twice as likely as those of other races to attend schools that offer no team sports.

On a hot summer evening, soon-to-be-seniors Bissiri Diakite and Coco Rhum are recording a podcast in a small conference room, laying out in black and white how different their Manhattan high schools are. Holding a microphone between them is Taylor McGraw, co-founder of The Bell, a nonprofit that produces student podcasts and facilitates Teens Take Charge.

Coco is white, as are 52 percent of students at Beacon High School, where she enjoys a variety of arts and project-based learning. The school has a relatively new building in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood and offers well-resourced classes and after-school activities, she says.



Caption

Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff

The Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change in Harlem, where Bissiri is among the 97 percent of students who are black or Hispanic, only offers a few sports and is sometimes shy on textbooks and other supplies. But the school gets good marks for leadership, rigorous instruction, and a supportive environment.

One thing they have in common: screened admissions, which means they consider factors ranging from test scores to interviews. Screening at some middle and high schools, and the single test for admissions to “specialized” high schools, have been challenged not only by activists, but also by Mayor Bill de Blasio and Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza.

Coco’s parents chose their Brooklyn neighborhood before she was born, because of its elementary and middle schools. Then she applied to several screened high schools. Bissiri’s school is two blocks from home. His mother, who is from Mali, told him he would stay there from middle to high school, so he didn’t think much about applying elsewhere.

His school might raise \$50 at a bake sale or \$100 at an event, he says. About 70 percent of students at Thurgood Marshall are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

At Coco’s school, that figure is just 25 percent. And the Beacon Parent Association sets an annual fundraising goal of \$400,000 a year to pay for everything from lab equipment to extracurriculars.

As a member of Teens Take Charge and the founder of an IntegrateNYC club at Beacon, Coco is pushing the school and Parent Association to change.

“It’s like a self-sustaining cycle,” she says, her face framed with crisp dark bangs. “Wealthy parents come to the school because it has great resources ... and then make it a more lucrative school. And within that there’s this screen that [keeps out many] low-income students and students of color.”

Bissiri agrees the inequities are obvious. But after talking with classmates, he says the focus should be on resources. Integration would be “taking a complicated problem and trying to narrow it down to a simple solution,” Bissiri says, still dressed in shiny shoes and a black tie after a day of training for his job at a bank that has a branch in his school.

When a news video circulated in April showing white parents reacting negatively to a plan to integrate schools in their Manhattan neighborhood, “a lot of my classmates were very upset” by the parents’ attitudes, he says. Because of such hostility, “one girl stated that she doesn’t want integration at all. She just wants to be with her people.”

Coco says she understands, but still believes students from different backgrounds need to learn together if racism is ever to be stamped out. “When you integrate, it can’t just be moving bodies.... No one’s culture should be lost,” she says.

Brooklyn’s District 15, where Coco lives, has held more than 80 community meetings to put together a plan aimed at integrating middle schools. Students have

been at the table consistently, says Sadye Campoamor, director of community affairs for the city's Department of Education.

Akin to the 5 R's, the proposals address everything from school climate to student and parent engagement.

District leaders were already considering such actions as student activism ramped up, Ms. Campoamor says, but students have "played a particularly inspiring role in getting us to listen to them.... These are tough conversations – saying the words segregation and desegregation.... [We] came together and said, the time is now to explore these heavy issues in partnership." Students are included in the city's School Diversity Advisory Group, for instance.

Adults on the sidelines

Adults involved with student integration activists say their role is to "de-center" themselves and help students develop their leadership skills.

IntegrateNYC grew out of a Bronx teacher's experience taking her students to visit a majority-white school in Manhattan. Students were so interested in the inequities they saw that they started to take on an activist role.

With 70 peers from 16 Long Island high schools, Sufyan Hameed learned about the history of segregation in his community and talked about potential solutions at a forum hosted by the local group ERASE Racism. Then he helped form a task force that has put forward students' policy priorities.

The number of intensely segregated school districts on Long Island has doubled since 2004. Mr. Hameed recently graduated from a majority-minority high school, and attending a career program at another school was "my first taste of how my district is really separated," he tells the educators at Teachers College.

Youth organizers "speak more powerfully and more comprehensively than most adults in this city on this issue," says Matt Gonzales, director of the School Diversity Project of New York Appleseed, an advocacy group that works closely with IntegrateNYC. And that, he says, "has really transformed the way we talk about integration."

This is story is part of an occasional series, Learning Together, on efforts to address segregation.