

# THE BENEFITS OF A DIVERSE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

## School Segregation

The 1954 ruling, *Brown v. the Board of Education*, declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. The goals of this ruling were two-fold: to provide equal educational opportunities for racial minorities and to promote interracial interaction and positive racial attitudes. Fifty years later, our schools are still segregated. In 1968, 86% of the average white student's classmates were white, while 4% were black. In 2000, those percentages had changed minimally to 79% white and 9% black. This racial segregation in schools creates unequal educational opportunities, limits interracial contact, and cultivates racial prejudice.

## A Possible Solution

Contact theory, a basic psychological framework for examining racial prejudice, proposes that the most effective means of reducing prejudice involves bringing people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds together under a specific set of ideal conditions. These conditions include equal status, inter-group collaboration, shared goals, and support from authorities. The impact of interracial friendships on racial attitudes is one of the strongest arguments supporting school desegregation in terms of students' social and emotional development.

## The Study

*The Friendship Factor: How Interracial Interaction Benefits Elementary Students* (Kline, Stanford University, 2005) examined the effects of racial integration in two Boulder Valley elementary schools. This study attempted to answer two major questions:

1. To what extent do elementary schools limit or promote interracial friendship formation?
2. How does interracial contact influence students' racial attitudes?

## Findings

This study clearly indicates that students who attend a diverse school are more likely than students at a homogenous school to establish interracial friendships. Additionally, students at diverse schools demonstrate more counterbias (positive opinions of people of other races) and lower levels of prejudice than their peers at homogenous schools. These findings support racial integration in schools as an effective means of increasing interracial interaction and challenging racial stereotypes.

It is important to note that the benefits of school desegregation are particularly significant for white students. White students at the diverse school report almost twice as many interracial friendships as white students at the homogenous school. In addition, white students at the diverse school displayed significantly higher levels of counterbias and were 50% less prejudiced overall than white students at the homogenous school.

## Benefits for Students

This research serves as an incentive for parents who want their children to become tolerant, open-minded world citizens to seek out diverse schools. Students who attend racially integrated schools will be more likely to successfully communicate and collaborate in our increasingly multicultural world.