

## **Business as Usual: Continued Racial Preferences in Seattle Public School Admissions**

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by Robert Holland - Director, Equal Citizenship Project

Last November, 58 percent of Washington state voters passed Initiative 200. It is surprising, therefore, to find that the state's largest public school district, Seattle, is continuing to use preferential treatment based on race for assigning students to schools.

The continued race-conscience admissions policy appears contrary to the direction laid out a few years ago by local education officials when they ended the district's failed mandatory busing program. At the time, Superintendent of Seattle Schools John Stanford said, "I don't have to sit next to someone of another color to learn."<sup>1</sup>

The Seattle School District now acknowledges that race-based busing proved to be a failure. Now is the time for the district to do the same with racial preferences. Yet the district continues to use the policy of "integration positive," which gives preference to some students over others in school enrollment based on race. This Policy Note will assess the impact of this policy in relation to Washington's newly enacted civil rights law.

### **A Closer Look at Seattle Schools**

The Seattle School District is one of the largest public school districts in the country. This June, the district has enrolled

47,073 students in its system of 93 schools for the coming school year. The district's general fund operating budget is \$359 million annually. The district generally spends about \$7,134 a year on each student in the system.<sup>2</sup>

The majority of students in Seattle public schools are non-white. There are 11,423 Asian American students (24.3 percent of the total), 10,777 African American students (22.9 percent), 4,444 Hispanic students (9.4 percent), and 1,410 Native American students (3.0 percent). White students make up the largest single ethnic group. Numbering 19,518 students, they comprise 40.4 percent of all enrollees.<sup>3</sup>

### **Six Criteria Used in Admissions**

Since mandatory busing has been eliminated, the district now seeks to give parents their first choice in the school their child will attend. Most parents get their first choice. When that is not possible, however, the district applies six priority criteria as "tiebreakers" to determine what school a student can attend.

The first consideration is whether the student has a brother or sister at the same school. Preference is given if a sibling is already enrolled at the school of the parents' choice. Next, the district looks at whether the student lives in the chosen school's

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Teichroeb, "Desegregation, end to forced busing creates new problems for Seattle's schools," Seattle Post-Intelligencer, June 3, 1999, p. A1.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Budget and School information see <http://www.komotv.com/schoolscout>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Regional Reference Area, that is, the area where the school is located.

For the third criterion, the district looks at race. In school records each student is assigned the status of “integration positive” or “integration negative,” depending on whether the student’s race, color, ethnicity or national origin matches the racial quota the district has established for the school that the parents requested. Below is the official description of how the integration positive policy works.

**“Integration Positive:** Each school will be designated as integration positive for whites, non whites or for all ethnic groups. *Preference will be given* whenever a minority student is applying to a school where the percentage of white students in the receiving school is more than 10 percent above the district white average, or a white student is applying to a school where the percentage of minority students in the receiving school is more than 10 percent above the district minority average” [emphasis added].<sup>4</sup>

The fourth criterion is whether the student has been part of an academically gifted program. The fifth criterion is the distance of the student’s home from the school, measured in a straight line. The sixth criterion is a lottery, using a computer-selected, random three-digit number given to each student.

### **The School District’s Policy Violates Initiative 200**

As illustrated above, all but one of the district’s “tiebreaker” criteria for

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<sup>4</sup> The six criteria for “tiebreakers” are described in “Q&A for student assigning” from the Office of Student Assignment.

determining school assignments use race-neutral information about students and do not interfere with their civil rights. But the third criterion in the district’s admissions policy uses race and is actually given higher priority than three race-neutral factors in determining what school a student may attend. Students who do not meet the color qualification for a given school are denied this preference, thereby violating the part of Initiative 200 that bars public schools from discriminating based on race.

### **Conclusion**

The policy can work equally against Seattle’s minority families. If the percentage of black, Asian, Hispanic and Native American students at a particular school is more than 10 percent above the percentage of minority residents in the area as a whole, then white applicants will receive the “integration positive” designation and be granted a preference over non-white students.

The admissions policy exposes the school district and taxpayers to costly civil rights lawsuits if students can show they are being denied an educational opportunity because of their race, color, ethnicity or national origin.

Eliminating the “integration positive” designation as part of its admissions policy would bring the district into compliance with the law and would keep faith with what Washington voters intended when they passed Initiative 200 in the first place. Then Seattle’s school children could be accepted for who they are, not for what they look like.