
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Integrated effort to fight housing, school barriers?

Original Reporting | By Greg Marx | Education, Housing



In Montgomery County, Maryland, an inclusionary zoning program begun in the 1970s has helped to integrate the local school district.

October 19, 2010 — It seems like a long time ago now, but in the early days of the Obama presidency, one of the Administration's signature efforts was going to be its renewed commitment to "urban policy" — that constellation of interlocking programs that shape our schools, our transportation networks, our neighborhoods and our local economies, and whose reach extends well beyond the "urban core" to the 80 percent of Americans who live in metropolitan areas. The federal government had paid "insufficient attention" to those challenges, Obama [declared just a month into his tenure](#), and his team was going to take advantage of fresh ideas to devise a comprehensive, holistic approach. And while

this program would of course require more new strategies and smarter planning, discussions of the agenda also invoked the great struggles of the 1960s: in a speech in May, Shaun Donovan, Obama's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, [described the creation](#) of "a geography of opportunity" as the "unfinished business of the Civil Rights movement."

In the wake of a prolonged economic crisis, the health care and financial reform battles, and the rise of the Tea Party, this topic has — with the exception of education policy — mostly faded from the headlines. But now, nearing the halfway mark of Obama's term, his Administration's broader plan is starting to take shape. As it does, a set of pressing questions is coming to the fore: How central are racial and economic integration to this new metropolitan agenda? How prepared are federal agencies — in housing, education, and related fields — to pursue those goals in the face of local recalcitrance? For that matter, how aggressively will the federal government pursue them at all?

One of the key outposts in the Administration's effort is the new Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities, the product of an interagency partnership between Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Transportation, and the Environmental Protection Agency. Run by Shelley Poticha, a veteran of the Smart Growth movement who previously held leadership positions at several top advocacy groups, [the office's mission](#) is to "create strong, sustainable communities by connecting

housing to jobs, fostering local innovation, and helping to build a clean energy economy.” To start with, the office has been allocated \$140 million to distribute to regions and communities that embrace the Administration’s vision of sustainability.

So what does “sustainability” mean? The term generally signifies environmental virtue, but the office insists that it has something much broader in mind. “For a community to be sustainable, first and foremost, people need to have a job,” says Mariia Zimmerman, Poticha’s deputy. “And having access to that economic opportunity for all households throughout the region is really critical. We can’t just have affluent neighborhoods in one area of the region, or jobs centered in a couple parts of the region... We see social equity, racial equity, income equity as being very critical and central.”

That expressed commitment was manifested in the guidelines given to regions seeking a share of the office’s funds. Applicants seeking a share of the office’s \$100 million in regional planning grants were required to provide data about how segregated their region is and where pockets of concentrated poverty exist, and to outline how the money will be used to meet fair housing obligations and promote more widespread access to employment. (Award winners [were announced](#) last Thursday; an independent evaluation of successful and unsuccessful applications was not possible by press time.) The office’s yet-to-be-announced community-level grants, meanwhile, are linked to transportation funds, in an effort to align housing with transit planning to both reduce carbon emissions and improve job access.

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The Administration’s stance represents a real break from a past — and some parts of the present — in which federal policy tended to focus affordable housing investments in poor neighborhoods even as it accelerated the flight of opportunity, in the form of both good jobs and good schools, to outlying areas. (To cite just one example, [a recent analysis](#) of the federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit in Southern California conducted by The Civil Rights Project at UCLA found that units funded by the credit, which now supports the bulk of new subsidized housing nationwide, were disproportionately located in high-poverty, segregated areas that fed into low-performing schools.) The approach of the Sustainable Communities office has been, [on the whole](#), [well-received](#) by advocates who focus on racial and economic integration as a way to create more opportunities for low-income households. And for communities and regions that embrace that vision and are looking for federal support, it is a welcome shift.

The model, though, is very much opt-in. “We are not forcing communities to have to do something,” says Zimmerman. Rather, the idea is to support local leaders who buy in, and try to demonstrate success that will generate momentum. “It’s not something that’s a top-down approach,” she says.

This strategy has the benefit of reducing political opposition. But the obvious risk is that some communities — including, disproportionately, those that have good schools, good jobs, and good but expensive housing — may opt out. This is one of HUD’s long-standing challenges: affluent communities weren’t seeking the low-income residences that historically were the agency’s chief tool, so “the provision of affordable housing” became, in effect, “voluntary,” said Phil Tegeler, executive director of the Poverty and Race Research Action Council in Washington, D.C.

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In effect, though not under the law. In addition to subsidizing public housing, HUD also administers a number of grant programs whose funds are widely distributed. Any community receiving these funds — such as recipients of the Community Development Block Grants, which amount to about \$3.6 billion a year — incurs an obligation to “affirmatively further” fair housing, including a requirement to act to overcome impediments to fair housing choice; further, every community — whether or not it receives HUD funds — is required to refrain from practices that promote segregated neighborhoods. But the “oversight and enforcement approaches” of the agency charged with enforcing these mandates, HUD’s Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, “have significant limitations,” according to [a September 2010 report](#) from the Government Accountability Office. The Fair Housing office began drafting new rules to promote compliance in 2009, and now says those rules should be in place in the next several months.

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In an interview, the office’s director, John Trasviña, declined to discuss details of that process, but outlined a vision that was consistent with that of the Sustainable Communities office. While racial and economic inequities are not the only impediments to fair housing, and explicit efforts at integration are not the only way to address them, Trasviña said, “we do see fundamentally... that we have to reduce segregation.” This is especially true when it comes to education: “Any parent would want their child to be in an integrated and diverse school and community in order to be prepared for the outside world and the workforce of the 21st century.” But a series of Supreme Court decisions have curtailed the ability of school districts to tackle this challenge directly, he noted, which “puts a greater responsibility on housing decision-makers.”

Delivering on the fair housing mandate will likely mean reorienting some federal programs, such as the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit. (A HUD spokeswoman said the agency is “acutely aware of the impact of LIHTC decision-making policies, including siting of properties, on affirmatively furthering fair housing,” but that further comment would be “premature.”) It will also, in some instances, require changing the way decisions get made at the local level. In one high-profile case involving New York’s Westchester County, which was found to be shirking its fair housing obligations, HUD intervened in 2009 to broker a settlement. (Remapping Debate is a project of the Anti-Discrimination Center, the non-profit organization that brought the case against the county.)

But in the interview, Trasviña, like Zimmerman, cast his office largely in the role of educator and facilitator, not enforcer or implementor. “It’s a matter of empowering local communities through HUD dollars to really reshape themselves,” he said. And, “the best thing we can do is help the local voices come forward and be heard as part of the process.” And, most forcefully, “we’re committed to providing data to local jurisdictions, and they need to be committed to sharing in this process.” (Asked about the prospects for more immediate approaches, such as having HUD directly initiate projects with integrative potential, Trasviña noted his bureau works alongside the Office of Community Planning and Development and other HUD divisions to ensure that federal support for local and non-profit investments takes fair housing into account. But, he said, “Are we going to turn the Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity into a grants and building program? No.”)

How effective is this approach of incentives and guidance and helping hands likely to be? Much depends, said David Rusk, an urban policy consultant and former mayor of Albuquerque, on the structure of local government. In states with strong, representative regional bodies in place — Rusk calls them “big box” states, because decision-making happens across a broader area — incentives can be powerful ways for the federal government to shape choices about housing and land use. But in “little box” states with small, autonomous governments, parochial concerns prevail. (This describes much of the Northeast and parts of the Midwest; New Jersey alone, for example, has 566 municipalities, each with its own zoning authority, and even more school districts.) “That’s where the incentive strategy falls short,” Rusk said. Affluent communities in those states “are never going to give in — they have to be told.” But the extent to which HUD is prepared to do the telling, when and where it is necessary, remains to be seen.



Richard Kahlenberg, shown here at a Century Foundation forum last week, argues that federal education policy is focused on “trying to make separate schools equal.” Also pictured is Nancy Navarro, a councilwoman in Maryland’s Montgomery County.

HUD’s language about the need for locally directed processes and the uniqueness of each place sounds sensible — so sensible that it can be easy to forget there are alternatives. But consider what has happened over the last decade in another policy area that has traditionally been left to local communities: education. The No Child Left Behind Act, passed during the Bush Administration, mandated the collection of extensive data sets in all school districts and established benchmarks for future performance (though it left the actual standards up to the states). And Obama’s Department of Education, led by Arne Duncan, has championed a controversial “turnaround” model for struggling schools, boosted federal subsidies for favored alternatives such as charter schools, and devised the Race to the Top program that distributed billions of dollars through competitive grants — an incentive program with considerable coercive force. Duncan’s approach has made some enemies. But it has also shown that the federal government can, when it chooses to, press a particular vision of reform on local government.

Ironically, this bold activity in education is in the service of a program that is, in the eyes of critics, insufficient — in large part because, unlike the more tentative steps to date on the housing front, it does not emphasize economic or racial integration. When it comes to housing, the Administration has articulated both an “inside game” strategy (improving conditions within poor communities) and an “outside game” approach (looking for ways to open up well-off areas). But in education, says Richard Kahlenberg of The Century Foundation, “the Administration’s efforts take as a given that our schools are going to be segregated, and then do their best at trying to make separate schools equal.” Even when the two agencies are formally aligned, as in the joint [Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative](#) (NRI) — which encompasses HUD’s Choice Neighborhoods program and the Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhoods effort — the overall emphasis is on bringing greater resources to “distressed neighborhoods.” While the Choice program is designed to foster mixed-income neighborhoods, during a [recent hour-long Web chat](#) about the NRI featuring representatives from four federal agencies, the topic of economic (and racial) integration did not come up.

Though school policy and housing policy have traditionally been treated as independent of each other, they are, in fact, intimately linked — especially with respect to integration. Unless other interventions are in place, segregated neighborhoods will create segregated schools, and segregated schools will perpetuate segregated neighborhoods. And, as the Boston busing crisis and similar skirmishes around the country showed a generation ago, segregated schools and neighborhoods are often fiercely defended. The Administration’s choice not to prioritize integration in school policy today can probably be understood, in part, as a desire not to refight those battles.

Some education advocates defend the thrust of the Administration’s policy on pragmatic grounds. “We tried basically for a generation to bring kids to good schools... and it failed,” says Andrew Rotherham, co-founder of the nonprofit organization Bellwether Education Partners and author of the blog [Eduwonk.com](#). And the legal and political environment is, if anything, less hospitable now than it was a generation ago, when courts imposed busing plans in an effort to integrate classrooms. “I’m a lot more interested in efforts that can create 2,000 good new seats in a community in a year or two” than in a long-term effort to shift the landscape, Rotherham says. (At the same time, he said, both the federal government and states can do more to create choices and opportunities for students served by weak schools — such as giving more affluent districts financial incentives to accept students from low-income areas, an idea also championed by some administration critics.)

Critics, though, note how difficult it is to improve student performance in racially or economically segregated schools, even with high-quality teachers and investments in other services. A recent [New York Times article](#), for example, noted that academic progress in the Harlem Children’s Zone — the model for the Promise Neighborhoods program — has been halting, despite the resources that have been provided both inside and outside the classroom.

The potential benefits of economic integration in schools, on the other hand, are illustrated in [a study published last week](#) by The Century Foundation. The report focuses on Maryland’s Montgomery County, where, thanks to an inclusionary zoning regime begun in the 1970s, affordable residences — some

of them owned by the local public housing agency — are scattered across both low- and moderate-poverty neighborhoods, and feed into both low- and moderate-poverty schools. Researcher Heather Schwartz, using data from 2001 to 2007, found that public housing students in both types of schools started out well behind their peers. But by sixth grade, the students who happened to attend more affluent schools had closed half the achievement gap in math, and made similar though smaller gains in reading. By contrast, students from public housing who attended schools with higher levels of poverty had made up no ground — even though the district had directed extra resources to schools with greater need. (The data also suggested that students in public housing benefited simply from living in middle-class neighborhoods, Schwartz found, but those results were not statistically significant, and were about one-third as great as the gains from attending middle-class schools.) The study suggests that, in Montgomery County at least, the most powerful educational intervention is economic integration — but there is an “enormous disconnect,” Kahlenberg said, between that insight and the direction of federal education policy.

Montgomery County’s experience shows, again, how housing and school policy are inextricably linked. (Indeed, Schwartz’s report is titled “Housing Policy is School Policy.”) Just as the existence of white suburban oases facilitated school segregation in the 1960s and ’70s without schools in those oases having to actively turn students away, the county’s mix of inclusionary zoning and public housing facilitated the integration of classrooms with no explicit effort on the part of the school district.

But as powerful as the program is, it is also small-scale: in a county that now has over 360,000 residences and nearly 1 million inhabitants, the inclusionary zoning program has in three decades generated about 12,000 affordable units, some of which no longer hold that designation. The county’s public housing agency owns fewer than 1,000 public housing residences, about 700 of which were produced by inclusionary zoning — “a drop in the bucket,” Schwartz noted in an interview. And as the county has grown larger and more diverse, debates about how to allocate scarce resources are becoming more fraught, said Nancy Navarro, a county councilwoman and former school board president. There is increasingly pressure to direct new investments in affordable housing to places where property values are lower, which would likely mean more low-income students attending higher-poverty schools.

In light of the pressures toward segregation in both schools and communities, it is hard to imagine a successful integration agenda, in the long run and at any significant scale, that does not take both sides of the equation into account. To that end, advocates like PRRAC’s Phil Tegeler call for strategies — such as [pairing quality magnet schools with public housing developments](#) — that aim to foster integrated schools as part of a path to integrated communities. But federal education policy is instead steering resources to charter schools, which, [some research suggests](#), may actually intensify segregation.

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For all the Administration's talk about comprehensive approaches to urban policy and its invocation of the Civil Rights struggle, with respect to racial and economic integration, an uneven picture is emerging. And, halfway through Obama's term, important questions remain unanswered: On the housing front, will incentives and inspiring language be accompanied by enforcement when it is needed? In education, will federal policy adopt approaches designed to open up seats in middle-class schools to more students? And most importantly, will policy-makers in these two related fields pursue an integrated vision that truly takes integration seriously?

This content originally appeared at www.remappingdebate.org/article/integrated-effort-fight-housing-school-barriers