

RETHINKING DIVERSITY: THE NEW VISION FOR STUDENT ASSIGNMENT IN JEFFERSON COUNTY, KY

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ABSTRACT

In 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, in what many consider to be a landmark case, that Jefferson County Public Schools could not use race of an individual student to maintain diversity in their schools.

The Jefferson County Board of Education quickly ceased to make new individual student assignment based on individual race, but also affirmed that diversity should continue to be a guiding principle in the development of the new student assignment plan.

In order to encourage diversity, while promoting parental choice and high quality educational experiences, Jefferson County Public Schools is implementing an ambitious new student assignment plan.

BACKGROUND

The Supreme Court ruled that while there is a *compelling governmental interest* in maintaining diversity in public schools, race may not be used in the assignment of an individual student.

However, race neutral and race conscious methods that do not identify an individual student by race may be used in assigning students to schools.

In fact, Justice Kennedy stated:

“The decision today should not prevent school districts from continuing the important work of bringing together students of different racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds . . . Those entrusted with directing our public schools can bring to bear the creativity of experts, parents, administrators, and other concerned citizens to find a way to achieve the compelling interests they face . . .”

In September 2007, the Board affirmed that diversity best serves the goal of public education in Jefferson County and it adopted the following *Guiding Principles* to evaluate proposed student assignment scenarios that would be developed by staff:

- ✓ Diversity
- ✓ Quality
- ✓ Choice
- ✓ Predictability
- ✓ Stability
- ✓ Equity

The Board also approved the process for developing a new plan which included public forums, public opinion surveys, consultation with national experts, reviews of student assignment plans in other districts and a review of the educational research literature.

RESEARCH REVIEW

Research over the past several decades have noted several benefits of a diverse learning environment, including:

- ✓ Prepare students to be effective citizens in our pluralistic society
- ✓ Further social cohesion and reinforce democratic values
- ✓ Promote cross-racial understanding
- ✓ Reduce prejudicial stereotypes
- ✓ Enhance life opportunities for students of all races
- ✓ Workforce that is better prepared for a global economy
- ✓ More willingness to live in diverse neighborhoods

Academic Achievement

The National Academy of Education (2007) summarized the social science research of 27 amicus briefs filed in the Supreme Court Case on race-conscious policies with regard to their impact on student achievement. Overall, the research evidence demonstrates that African-American student achievement is enhanced by less segregated schooling and that these positive effects tend to be larger in earlier grades.

Interpersonal Relations

Research has also shown positive effects of desegregation on intergroup relations. Elementary school students who were exposed to people of different ethnicities show long-term effects on overcoming prejudices and establishing positive relationships into adulthood (Holme, Wells, & Revilla, 2005). In a meta-analysis of over 500 studies with 250,000 people, findings suggest that contact between those from different groups reduces prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006)

Demographic Changes on Schools and Communities

Racial diversity of schools can also be linked to teacher experience and stability within the school community (Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). This research has important implications given that higher teacher mobility most impacts heavily disadvantaged schools and results in a higher number of novice and inexperienced teachers in high needs schools.

In sum, the National Academy (2007) argues that although assignments based on race-neutral policies, such as socioeconomic status, are likely to marginally reduce racial isolations, none of the alternatives are as effective as race-conscious policies for achieving racial diversity.

JCPS STUDENT ASSIGNMENT OPTIONS

JCPS student assignment team explored several options with the intent of maintaining and promoting a diverse learning environment., including:

- ✓ Choice Only
- ✓ Resides Only
- ✓ **Multiple Criteria Scenarios**

After exploring the options listed above, consulting with national experts and reviewing student assignment plans in other districts, the district moved forward with a “Geographic” plan that was based on the following multiple criteria:

- ✓ Percentage of minority students
- ✓ Educational Attainment of adults
- ✓ Median household income per household member

These factors were specifically selected because research consistently finds a direct effect of these factors on students’ academic performance.

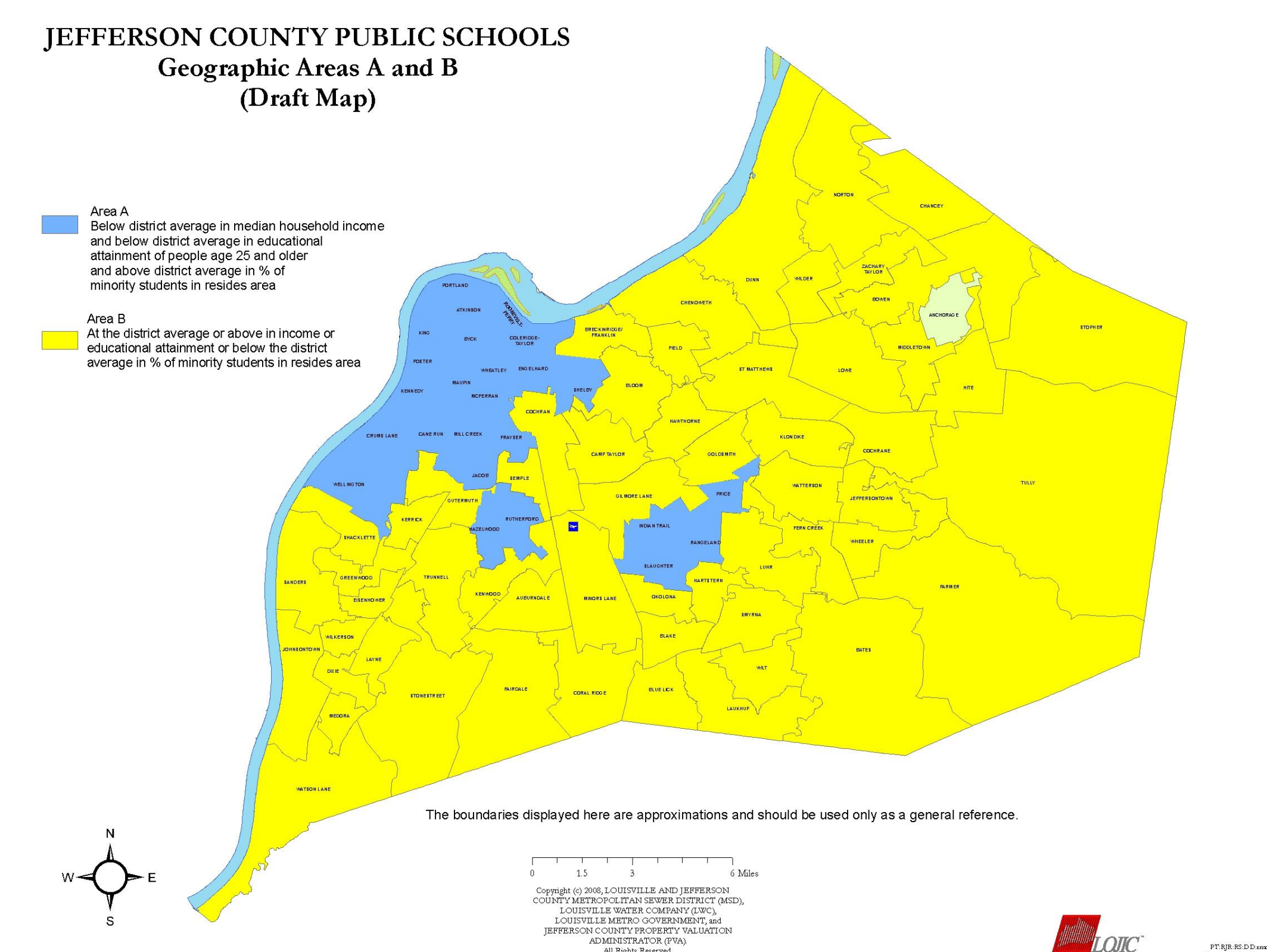
JCPS STUDENT ASSIGNMENT PLAN

Based on the multiple criteria , Jefferson County was divided into two geographic regions.

Geographic Area A is comprised on those areas below the district average in median household income and the educational attainment of people age 25 or older and above the district average in the percentage of minority students in the resides area.

Geographic Area B are those that are above the district average in median household income or educational attainment of people age 25 or older or below the district average in the percentage of minority students in the resides area (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:



The significant elements of the elementary student assignment plan are:

- ✓ The district shall be organized into two geographic areas based on multiple demographic characteristics
- ✓ Elementary schools shall be arranged in contiguous clusters to provide a more equitable distribution of the multiple criteria across the clusters
- ✓ Students shall be assigned to schools based upon the geographic area in which they reside. The race of an individual student will not be used.
- ✓ All schools, including magnet schools, shall have enrollment of no less than 15% and no more than 50% of students who reside in Geographic Area A.

Table 1: Cluster Summary of Multiple Criteria

Cluster	Number of Schools	Household Income 2000	Household Income 2010	Education Average	% Total Minority	Average T Score	% Area A Resides
1	15	\$ 34,314	\$ 52,363	2.9	47.8%	46	38%
2	13	\$ 32,639	\$ 49,957	2.9	47.8%	46	37%
3	14	\$ 35,166	\$ 53,591	2.9	48.3%	47	25%
4	12	\$ 45,812	\$ 68,813	3.2	49.3%	51	24%
5	14	\$ 45,484	\$ 68,836	3.3	47.2%	51	34%
6	14	\$ 50,009	\$ 76,185	3.4	45.5%	52	31%
Range	3	\$ 17,370	\$ 26,228	0.5	3.8%	6	14%

PUBLIC INPUT

In order to gather public input regarding the new student assignment plan, JCPS held community forums, constituency briefings, and surveyed parents and community members. In total, over 3,056 individuals provided feedback on the characteristics of the new plan.

In sum, there was remarkable consistency among respondents and across different demographic groups and the vast majority of individuals affirmed the importance of diversity in schools.

- ✓ 88% reported that it is important for students from diverse backgrounds to be brought together in schools.
- ✓ 88% indicated that the school district should have guidelines for enrollments to ensure that students learn with students from different races and backgrounds.

There was wide agreement in regard to the multiple criteria used to establish the geographic plan.

- ✓ 90% indicated that a diverse environment for children should include students from different racial or ethnic groups.
- ✓ 87% indicated that a diverse environment should include students from lower, middle and higher income families.
- ✓ 83% responded that a diverse environment should include students of parents with different educational levels.

Success will be measured by :

- ✓ Meeting the diversity guideline of 15/50 Area A within each school
- ✓ How much parent choice can be accommodated while still achieving the diversity goal

REFERENCES

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