

Increasingly Separate and Unequal in U.S. and Virginia Schools



THE COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE
Building a Prosperous Virginia for All

By Chris Duncombe and Michael Cassidy

There are more public schools isolated by race and income in Virginia and across the United States than there were over a decade ago.

This is alarming because schools with high concentrations of students of color and from low-income families face significant challenges in attracting high-quality teachers, overcoming the influence of low-achieving classmates, and providing sufficient resources for students.

The unfortunate result is that too many students in our schools do not receive the level of education our state is capable of providing, diminishing the opportunities available to these students and weakening our state's future economic prospects overall.

State lawmakers and local school divisions can take action to improve educational opportunities for students in racially and economically "isolated schools," those with high concentrations of low-income students and students of color.

One tool our state already has for this purpose is called the At-Risk Add-On program, which provides additional funds to support the education of students from low-income families. The state should boost support for this program to make it more in-line with other states. At the local level, school divisions should implement enrollment policies that encourage diverse, balanced schools.

In particular, regional strategies of "controlled choice" enrollment could be used to promote choice and diversity within public schools.

More Schools Isolated by Poverty and Race in U.S. and Virginia

The percentage of schools in the U.S. with high rates of students from families struggling to make ends meet and high rates of Black or Hispanic students has increased dramatically since the turn of the century—rising to 16 percent of all K-12 public schools, up from 9 percent, according to a report by the Government Accountability Office. That means that almost 1 in every 6 public schools in the country is isolated by both race and income. In these schools, 75 percent or more of students are Black or Hispanic and 75 percent or more are from low-income families.

The report finds that 4.3 million more students in the U.S. attend one of these racially and economically isolated schools than did in the 2000-2001 school year. Part of that increase is from the growing

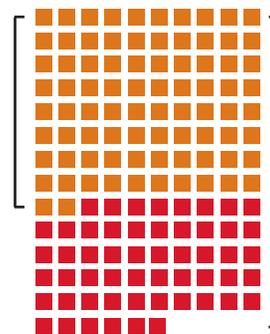
number of isolated schools and the other part is from increasing enrollment in schools already isolated. The report also finds that isolated schools have fewer resources—offering fewer math, science, and college preparatory classes—and have disproportionately higher rates of students suspended or expelled.

The story is similar for Virginia. Since the 2003-2004 school year, the number of public schools in Virginia isolated by race and income increased by over 60 percent rising to 136 from 82, according to TCI analysis of Virginia Department of Education data. There are now 38,500 more students attending racially and economically isolated schools in Virginia. In total, there are now 74,515 students in these isolated schools, including 17 percent of all Black students in Virginia's public schools and 8 percent of all Hispanic students.

Highly Segregated

The number of schools isolated by poverty and race has grown dramatically in Virginia since 2003 and so has their enrollment.

In **2003** Virginia had **82** low-income, high-Black/Hispanic schools with **36,061** students



By **2014** that number has grown to a total of **136** low-income, high-Black/Hispanic schools with **74,515** students

Note: Schools are classified as high-poverty, high-Black/Hispanic if 75% or more of their students receive free or reduced lunch and 75% or more are Black or Hispanic.
Source: TCI Analysis of VDOE Student Membership and Free and Reduced Lunch data.

In contrast, less than 1 percent of the state’s non-Hispanic White students are in these schools.

Richmond City and Norfolk Public Schools are the school divisions with the most isolated schools in the state. Combined, they have over one-third of the state’s total. Other divisions with many isolated schools include Prince William, Newport News, Henrico, Petersburg, and Roanoke City.

The increasing number of isolated schools has also contributed to a sharp increase in the share of Black or Hispanic students who attend low-income schools in Virginia.

Concentrated Poverty Hurts Kids’ Success in the Classroom

These findings should raise eyebrows because schools with high concentrations of low-income students face myriad challenges as a result. Since a landmark report by James Coleman on this issue in 1966, numerous subsequent

studies have demonstrated that the socioeconomic status of a student’s classmates is extremely influential on his/her school performance. Studies show the achievement of peers has a strong and direct impact on learning. They have also found that the socioeconomic status of classmates influences graduation rates and enrollment in higher education after controlling for other relevant variables.

In addition, schools with high-concentrations of poverty have difficulty attracting and retaining the best teachers. Schools in urban areas with higher levels of low-income and non-white students have less qualified and experienced instructors. And schools with more minority and low-income students have much higher turnover rates for teachers, which disrupts the school environment and causes a loss of talented staff.

Further, these communities are more likely to have school facilities in dire need of repair and maintenance. This experience is well known to residents of the City

of Richmond, where crumbling facilities regularly make news.

These challenges have consequences. As VCU Professor Genevieve Siegel-Hawley notes in *When the Fences Come Down*, her book researching the issue, “Ultimately, the combination of harms produce deeply unequal educational and life outcomes.”

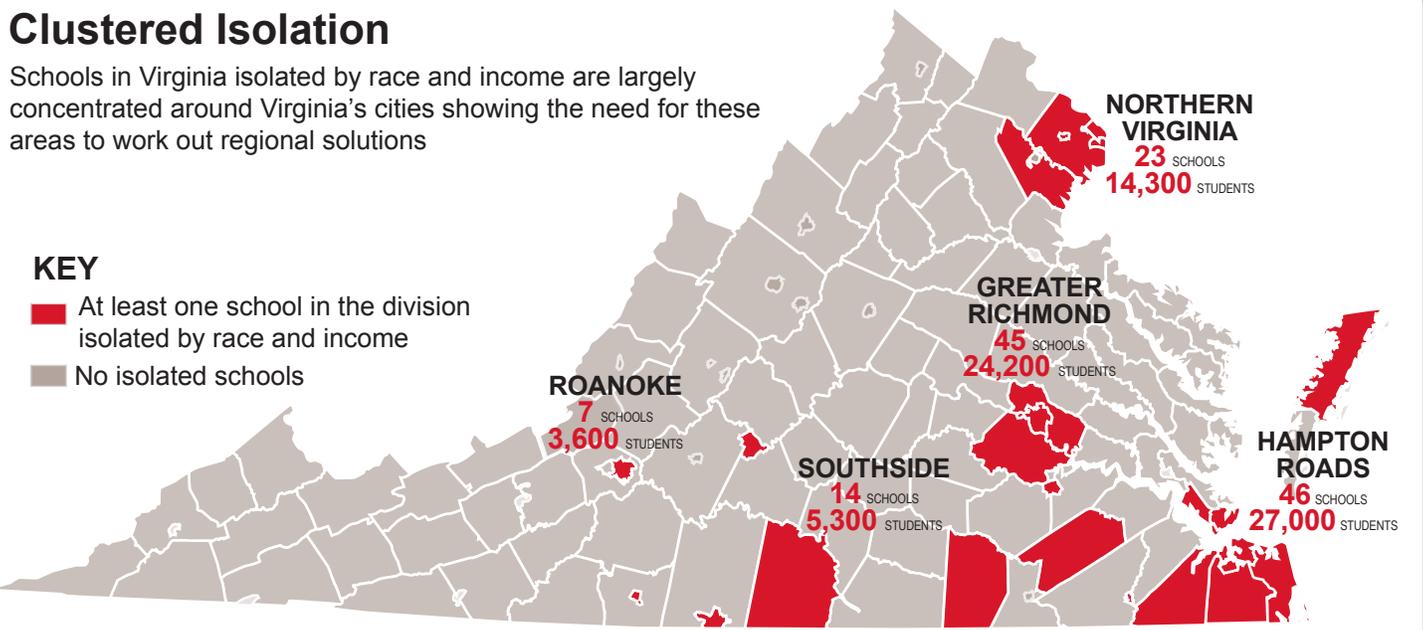
Breaking Down Barriers

The state can and should take action to help by targeting more resources to school divisions with the highest concentrations of students living in poverty. Those school divisions include most of Virginia’s racially and economically isolated schools. This support can help reduce class sizes, attract the best teachers, and buy supplies and equipment for career and technology classes that are in-demand by employers.

This is needed because Virginia currently lags many other states in its support for low-income students. In Virginia, the state provides 1 to 13 percent more for each low-income student through the

Clustered Isolation

Schools in Virginia isolated by race and income are largely concentrated around Virginia’s cities showing the need for these areas to work out regional solutions



Source: TCI Analysis of VDOE Student Membership and Free and Reduced Lunch data

THE COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE

At-Risk Add-On Program. This level of support is lower than what most states that take poverty levels into consideration provide. States that provide support in their primary funding formula provide an average of a 29 percent boost per low-income student. Extra help is needed for these students because many face serious distractions such as hunger and frequent changes in residence, and they lack resources outside of the classroom like private tutoring or participation in structured activities. Research shows it can cost as much as two to two-and-a-half times more to help low-income students reach similar levels of performance as students from wealthier families.

Local school divisions should also start to diversify their schools. They can do this by promoting school choice and diversity standards under a model called controlled-choice. This model allows parents to select the public school in their division that they would like their child to attend—similar to open-enrollment. These choices are then balanced with diversity factors such as socioeconomic status or race that help break up concentrations of poverty and address Virginia’s legacy of residential and school segregation. The goal is to simultaneously promote

choice and diversity. This strategy could be particularly effective at increasing diversity in public schools in the Greater Richmond area, if it is done regionally with the city and suburbs partnering together.

School districts around the country have implemented versions of controlled-choice and they have been effective at increasing diversity in public schools. Cambridge Public Schools in Massachusetts was the first to use controlled-choice in the U.S. Since implementing the program in the early 1980s, they went from having six schools comprised mostly of students of color and five schools that were almost entirely white to having more racially balanced schools and not having a single elementary school with a majority students of a single race/ethnicity in 2000-2001 school year. In addition to achieving diversity goals, the Cambridge model has also promoted school choice. Every school in the district is a magnet school with its own specialty and focus allowing students and families to find the best fit for each student.

Free transportation for students is a necessary feature within these programs, since many students do not have access to transportation and may not choose to

attend the closest school. Without free transportation, that choice is only really given to those that can afford it. For example, 17 percent of households in Richmond City and 13 percent of Norfolk households do not have an available vehicle. In addition, it’s important that schools undertake extensive outreach to the community to raise awareness among parents and students about this program and to ensure that all families who are interested are able to participate.

More than 60 years ago the U.S. Supreme Court made clear that separate is inherently unequal, and yet we are growing more separate and more unequal. That is unacceptable. Allowing these disparities to continue and even worsen puts in place barriers to striving students that will affect the opportunities available to them for the rest of their lives. The state and local school divisions can play a role to support and diversify Virginia’s public schools so that every student has an equal opportunity at success.

Allowing these disparities to continue and even worsen puts in place barriers to striving students that will affect the opportunities available to them for the rest of their lives.

The Commonwealth Institute

The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis provides credible, independent and accessible information and analyses of state public policies with particular attention to the impacts on low- and moderate-income persons. This research was funded in part by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation. Contact 804-396-2051 or go to www.thecommonwealthinstitute.org.

